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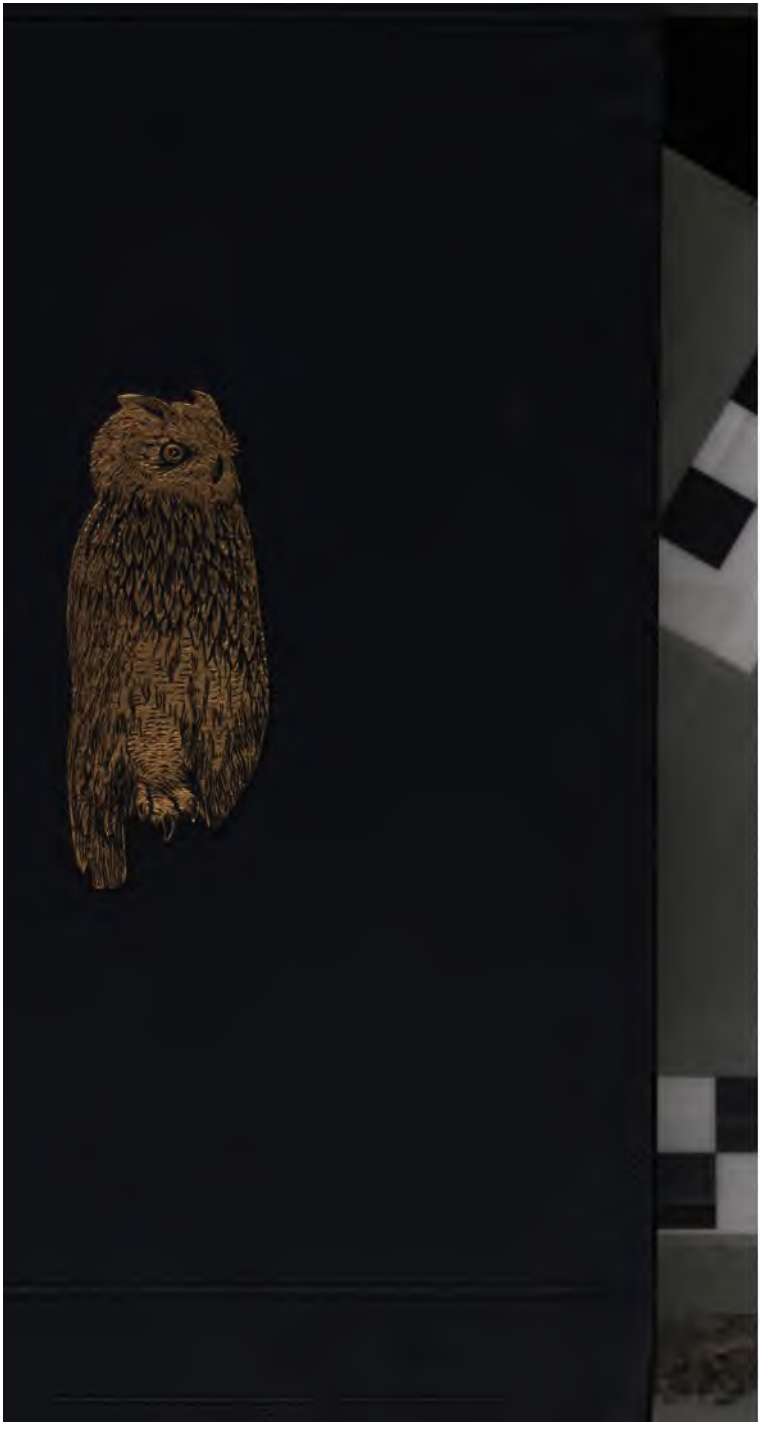

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MORE TALES OF THE BIRDS

THE LARK'S NEST.

MORE TALES OF THE BIRDS

BY

W. WARDE FOWLER

AUTHOR OF "A YEAR WITH THE BIRDS," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY FRANCES L. FULLER

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TO

A. A. E. F.

IN MEMORY OF PLEASANT DAYS

IN THE SUNNY SUMMER

OF 1901

CONTENTS

		PAGE
I.	THE LARK'S NEST	1
II.	THE SORROWS OF A HOUSE MARTIN	24
III.	THE SANDPIPERS	51
IV.	THE LAST OF THE BARONS	79
V.	DOWNS AND DUNGEONS	104
VI.	DOCTOR AND MRS. JACKSON	130
VII.	A LUCKY MAGPIE	147
VIII.	SELINA'S STARLING	185
IX.	TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING	204

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

THE LARK'S NEST . . . . . *Frontispiece.*

THE SORROWS OF A HOUSE MARTIN . . . *To face page* 24

THE SANDPIPERS . . . . . „ „ 52

THE LAST OF THE BARONS . . . . . „ „ 80

DOWNS AND DUNGEONS . . . . . „ „ 104

DOCTOR AND MRS. JACKSON . . . . . „ „ 131

A LUCKY MAGPIE . . . . . „ „ 148

SELINA'S STARLING . . . . . „ „ 186

MORE TALES OF THE BIRDS

THE LARK'S NEST

A STORY OF A BATTLE

I

It was close upon Midsummer Day, but it was not midsummer weather. A mist rose from moist fields, and hung over the whole country-side as if it were November; the June of 1815 was wet and chill, as June so often is. And as the mist hung over the land, so a certain sense of doubt and anxiety hung over the hearts of man and beast and bird. War was in the air as well as mist; and everything wanted warmth and peace to help it to carry out its appointed work; to cheer it with a feeling of the fragrance of life.

The moisture and the chilliness did not

prevent the Skylark from taking a flight now and then into the air, and singing to his wife as she sat on the nest below; indeed, he rose sometimes so high that she could hardly hear his voice, and then the anxious feeling got the better of her. When he came down she would tell him of it, and remind him how dear to her that music was. "Come with me this once," he said at last in reply. "Come, and leave the eggs for a little while. Above the mist the sun is shining, and the real world is up there to-day. You can dry yourself up there in the warmth, and you can fancy how bad it is for all the creatures that have no wings to fly with. And there are such numbers of them about to-day—such long lines of men and horses! Come and feel the sun and see the sights."

He rose again into the air and began to sing; and she, getting wearily off the nest, followed him upwards. They passed through the mist and out into the glorious sunshine; and as they hung on the air with fluttering wings and tails bent downwards, singing and still gently rising, the sun at last conquered the

fog to the right of them, and they saw the great high road covered with a long column of horsemen, whose arms and trappings flashed with the sudden light. They were moving southward at a trot as quick as cavalry can keep up when riding in a body together; and behind them at a short interval came cannon and waggons rumbling slowly along, the drivers' whips cracking constantly as if there were great need of hurry. Then came a column of infantry marching at a quickstep without music, all intent on business, none falling out of the ranks; they wore coats of bright scarlet, which set off young and sturdy frames. And then, just as an officer, with dripping plume and cloak hanging loosely about him, turned his horse into the wet fields and galloped heavily past the infantry in the road, the mist closed over them again, and the Larks could see nothing more.

But along the line of the road, to north as well as south, they could hear the rumbling of wheels and the heavy tramp of men marching, deadened as all these sounds were by the mud of the road and by the dense air. Nay, far

away to the southward there were other sounds in the air—sounds deep and strange, as if a storm were beginning there.

"But there is no storm about," said the Skylark's wife; "I should have felt it long ago. What is it, dear? what can it be? Something is wrong; and I feel as if trouble were coming, with all these creatures about. Look there!" she said, as they descended again to the ground at a little distance, as usual from the nest; "look there, and tell me if something is not going to happen!"

A little way off, dimly looming through the mist, was a large cart or waggon moving slowly along a field-track. Leading the horses was the farmer, and sitting in the cart was the farmer's wife, trouble written in her face; on her lap was a tiny child, another sat on the edge of the cart, and a third was astride on one of the big horses, holding on by his huge collar, and digging his young heels into the brawny shoulders below him. All of these the Skylarks knew well; they came from the farm down in the hollow, and they must be leaving their old home, for there

was crockery, and a big clock, and a picture or two, and other household goods, all packed in roughly and hurriedly, as if the family had been suddenly turned out into the world. The farmer looked over his shoulder and said a cheering word to his wife, and the Skylark did the same by his.

"Don't get frightened," he said, "or you won't be able to sit close. And sitting close is the whole secret, dear, the whole secret of nesting. I'm sorry I took you up there, but I meant well. Promise me to sit close; if any creature comes along, don't you stir—it is the whole secret. They won't find you on the eggs, if you only sit close; and think how hard it is to get back again without being seen when once you're off the nest! There's nothing to alarm you in what we saw. See, here we are at the nest, and how far it is from the big road, and how snugly hidden! Promise me, then, to sit close, and in a day or two we shall begin to hatch."

She promised, and nestled once more on the eggs. It was true, as he had said, that the nest was some way from the road; it was in fact about halfway between two high roads, which

separated as they emerged from a great forest to the northwards, and then ran at a wide angle down a gentle slope of corn-land and meadow. In the hollow near to the western road lay the farmhouse, whose owners had been seen departing by the Skylarks, standing in a little enclosure of yard and orchard; near the other road, but higher up the slope, was another homestead. On the edge of the slope, connecting the two main roads, ran a little cart-track, seldom used; just such a deeply-rutted track as you may see on the slope of a south-country down, cutting rather deeply into the ground in some places, so that a man walking up to it along the grass slope might take an easy jump from the edge into the ruts, and need a vigorous step or two to mount on the other side. Just under this edge of the grass-field, and close to the track, the Larks had placed their nest; for the grass of the field, cropped close by sheep, offered them little cover; and they did not mind the cart or waggon that once in two or three days rolled lazily by their home, driven by a drowsy countryman in a short blue frock.

Next day the weather was worse, though the fog had cleared away; and in the afternoon it began to rain. Long before sunset the Larks began to hear once more the rumbling of waggons and the trampling of horses; they seemed to be all coming back again, for the noise grew louder and louder. Each time the cock bird returned from a flight, or brought food to his wife, he looked, in spite of himself, a little graver. But she sat close, only starting once or twice from the nest when the distant crack of a gun was heard.

"Sit close, sit close," said her consort, "and remember that the way to get shot is to leave the nest. We are perfectly safe here, and I will be hiding in the bank at hand, if any danger should threaten."

As he spoke, men passed along the track; then more, and others on the grass on each side of it. Then that dread rumbling grew nearer, and a medley of sounds, the cracking of whips, the clanging of metal, the hoarse voices of tired men, began to grow around them on every side. Once or twice, as it began to grow dusk, men

tried to kindle a fire in the drizzle, and by the fitful light groups of men could be seen, standing, crouching, eating, each with his musket in his hand, as if he might have to use it at any moment. Officers walked quickly round giving directions, and now and then half-a-dozen horsemen, one on a bay horse always a little in advance, might be seen moving about and surveying the scene. Then more men passed by, and ever more, along the slope; more horses, guns, and waggons moved along the track. A deep slow murmur seemed to rise in the air, half stifled by the pouring rain, and broken now and then by some loud oath near at hand, as a stalwart soldier slipped and fell on the soppy ground. Then, as lights began to flash out on the opposite rise to the southward, a noise of satisfaction seemed to run along the ground—not a cheer, nor yet a laugh, but something inarticulate that did duty for both with wet and weary men. In time all became quiet, but for the occasional voice of a sentinel; and now and then a cloaked form would rise from the ground and try to make a smouldering fire burn up.

All this time the Skylark's wife had been sitting close; men and horses were all around, but the nest was safe, being just under the lip of the bank. Her husband had crept into a hole close by her, and was presently fast asleep, with his head under his wing. They had already got used to the din and the sounds, and they could not abandon the nest. There they slept, for the present in peace, though war was in the air, and seventy thousand men lay, trying to sleep, around them.

II

On that first day, when the sun had broken through the mist and shone upon the army hastening southwards, an English lad, in the ranks of an infantry regiment, had heard the singing of the Larks high above them. He was a common village lad, a "Bill" with no more poetry or heroism in him than any other English Bill; snapped up at Northstow Fair by a recruiting serjeant, who was caught by his sturdy limbs and healthy looks; put through the mill of army discipline, and turned out ready to go

anywhere and do anything at command—not so much because it was his duty, as because it was the lot that life had brought him. He was hardly well past what we now call schoolboy years, and he went to fight the French as he used to go to the parson's school, without asking why he was to go. He might perhaps have told you, if you had asked him the question, that trudging along that miry road, heavily laden, and wet with the drippings of the forest they had just passed through, was not much livelier than trying to form pothooks under the parson's vigilant eye.

When they emerged from the forest into the open, and began to descend the gentle slope into the hollow by the farmhouse, the sun broke out, as we have seen, and Bill, like the rest, began to look about him and shake himself. Looking up at the bit of blue sky, he saw two tiny specks against it, and now for the first time the Lark's song caught his ear.

At any other moment it would have caught his ear only, and left his mind untouched. But it came with the sun, and opened some secret spring under that red coat, without the wearer knowing

it. Bill's sturdy legs tramped on as before, but his thoughts had suddenly taken flight. There was nothing else to think of, and for a minute or two he was away in English midlands, making his way in heavy boots and gaiters to the fields at daybreak, with the dew glistening on the turnip-leaves, and the Larks singing overhead. In those early morning trudges, before work drove all else from his mind, he used to think of a certain Polly, the blooming daughter of the blacksmith; so he thought of Polly now. Her vision stayed awhile, and then gave way to his mother and the rest of them in that little thatched cottage shrinking away from the road by the horsepond; and then the Rectory came in sight just beyond, and the old parson's black gaiters and knotted stick. Bill, the parson's schoolboy, bringing home one day a lark's nest entire with four eggs, had come upon the parson by the gate, and shrunk from the look of that stick.

Bill had put the nest behind him, but it was too late; and he was straightway turned back the way he came, and told to replace the nest where he found it.

"And mind you do it gently, Bill," said the old parson, "or the Lord won't love you any more!"

To disobey the parson would have been for Bill a sheer impossibility, though easy enough for other lads. For him the old parson had been in the place of a father ever since he lost his own; and at home, in school, in church, or in the village, he often saw the old man many times a day. Not that he exactly loved him—or at least he was not aware of it; he had more than once tasted of the big stick, and oftener deserved it. But in Bill there was a feeling for constituted authority, which centred itself in those black gaiters and in that bent form with the grey hair; and it was strengthened by a dim sense of gratitude and respect; so he turned back without a word, and put back the nest with all the care he could.

When he came in sight once more, the parson was still at his gate, looking down the road for him from under the wide brim of his old hat.

"Have you done it, Bill?" he said, and

without waiting for an answer, "will they thrive yet, do ye think?"

"I see the old 'uns about, sir," says Bill. "There's a chance as they may take to 'un again, if the eggs be'ant to' cold 'owever."

"Then the Lord 'll love you, Bill," said the old man, quite simply, and turned away up his garden. And Bill went home too; he told no one the story, but the parson's last words got a better hold of him than all the sermons he had ever heard him preach.

And so it came about that, years afterwards, as he trudged along that Belgian highroad, besides Polly and his mother and the cottage, he saw the Rectory and the old parson, standing at the gate—waiting for the postman, perhaps with news from the seat of war. "I never wrote to 'un," thought Bill, "as I said I would, to let 'un see a bit of my scrawlen——"

But a nudge of the elbow from the next man drove all these visions away.

"D'ye hear that, youngster?" said this neighbour, an old Peninsular veteran, once a serjeant, and now degraded to the ranks for drunkenness;

"d'ye hear that noise in front? That's a battle, that is, and we'll be too late for it, unless Bony fights hard, drat him!"

The pace was quickened, and for several miles they went on in silence, the sound of battle gradually getting louder. At last it began to die away; and soon an aide-de-camp came galloping up and spoke to their colonel, who halted his men in a field by the roadside. Then tumbrils full of wounded men began to roll slowly along the road, at which Bill looked at first with rather a wistful gaze. At last night set in, and they bivouacked on the field as they were.

Early next morning troops began to file past them — infantry, artillery, and baggage; the cavalry, so Bill was told by his neighbour in the ranks, was in the rear keeping off the enemy. Bony was coming after them, sure enough, he said, and the Duke must draw back and get all his troops together, and get the Prussians too, before he could smash that old sinner.

At last their turn came to file into the road, and retrace their steps of yesterday. It was now raining, and already wet and cold, and Bill

simply plodded on like a machine, till a slight descent, and the sight of the farmhouse, and of the dark forest looming in front of them, told him that he was again on the ground where the sun had shone and the Lark sung. And his trials for that day were nearly at end, for no sooner had they mounted the slope on the further side, than they were ordered to the right, and turning into the fields by the little cross-track, were halted between the two roads, and lay down as they were, tired out.

III

Dawn was beginning at three o'clock on Sunday the 18th of June, and the Lark was already astir. In the night an egg had been hatched, and great was the joy of both parents. All was quiet just around the nest; at a little distance a sentinel was pacing up and down, but no one else was moving. The wife, at a call from her mate, left the nest, and rose with him through the drizzling rain.

"Higher, higher," cried the cock bird, "let

us try for the blue sky again, and look for the sunrise as we sing!" And higher they went, and higher, but found no blue that day; and when the sun rose behind the clouds, it rose with an angry yellow light, that gave no cheer to man or beast. And what a sight it showed below them! All along the ridge for a mile and a half lay prostrate forms, huddled together for warmth; picketed horses stood asleep with drooping heads; cannon and waggons covered the ground towards the forest. And all that host lay silent, as if dead. And over there, on the opposite height, lay another vast and dark crowd of human beings. What would happen when they all woke up?

The Larks spent some time, as was their wont, bathing themselves in the fresher air above, and then descended slowly to find insects for the new-born little one. Slowly—for a weight lay on the hearts of both; there was peril, they knew, though neither of them would own it. As they approached the earth, they saw a figure kneeling against the bank, and prying into the ground just where lay the home of all their fond desire.

Each uttered at the same moment a piteous cry, and the figure, looking up, rose quickly from his knees and watched them. Then he went slowly away, and lay down among a group of cloaked human forms.

It was Bill, just released from sentinel duty. As he paced to and fro, he had seen the Larks rise, and, relieved by a comrade in a few minutes, he searched at once for the nest. Bill was not likely to miss it; he knew the ways of larks, and searched at a little distance right and left from the spot he had seen them leave. There was the nest—three brown eggs and a young one; it brought back once more the Rectory gate, and the old parson, and those few words of his. "I wish as I'd sent 'un a letter," he said to himself, as he heard the Larks' cry, and rose from his knees. That was all he said or thought; but Bill went quietly back to his wet resting-place, and slept with a clear conscience, and dreamed of pothooks and Polly.

When he woke nearly every one was astir: all looking draggled, cold, and dogged. Breakfast was a poor meal, but it freshened up Bill, and

after it he found time to go and spy again at the nesting-place. The hen was sitting close, and he would not disturb her. The cock was singing above ; presently he came down and crept through the grass towards her. But Bill saw no more then, for the bugles began to call, and all that great host fell gradually into battle array.

Bill's regiment was stationed some little way behind the cart-track, and was held ready to form square at a moment's notice. Hours passed, and then a hurried meal was served out ; the battle was long in beginning. Every now and then Bill could hear the Lark's song overhead, and he listened to it now, and thought of the nest as he listened. He could not see it, for a battery of artillery was planted between him and the track ; but he kept on wondering what would happen to it, and it helped him to pass the weary hours of waiting.

At last, just at the time when the bells of the village church were beginning to ring at home—when village lads were gathering about the church door, and the old clerk was looking up the hymns, and getting the music out on the

desks for the two fiddles and the bassoon—a flash and a puff of white smoke were seen on the opposite height, then another and another, and every man knew that the battle had begun.

And then the time began to go faster. Bill watched the artillerymen in front of him, and the smoke in the enemy's lines, when he was not occupied with something else under his serjeant's quick eye. Something was doing down there at the farmhouse; he could hear it, but could not see. Away on the left, too, he could see cavalry moving, and once saw the plumes of the Scots Greys on the enemy's side of the valley, and then saw them galloping back again, followed by squadrons of French horse. Then an order was given to form square; cannon-balls began to whistle round, and as the square was formed, some men fell. Then a long pause. Suddenly the artillerymen came running back into the square, and Bill, in the front of the square, could see the further edge of the cart-track in front of him lined with splendid horsemen, who dropped into it and rose again

on the other side, charging furiously at the square. Not a word was said, or a gun fired, till they were quite close; then the word was given, the front ranks of the square fired, and half the horsemen seemed to fall at once. Others rode round it, and met the same fate from the other sides. Then back went all the rest as best they could, with another volley after them, and Bill had seen his first fight.

Again and again this wave of cavalry came dashing against them, and each time it broke and drew back again. So the day wore on, and the battle raged all round. Ranks grew thinner and men grew tired of carrying the dead and dying out of their midst. Bill's square was never broken, but the men were worn out, the colonel and most of the officers were killed or wounded, and still the battle went on.

At last, when the sun was getting low, the regiment was suddenly ordered forward. Glad to move their stiffened limbs at last, the men deployed as if on parade-ground, and dashed forward in line at the double. Bill saw that he would cross the cart-track close by the Lark's

nest; in all that din and fever of battle, he still thought of it, and wondered what its fate had been. Another minute and they were crossing the track, and as they leapt up the other side, he saw a bird fly out from under the feet of a soldier next but one to himself. The next moment he felt a sudden sharp blow, and fell insensible.

When he came to himself he could see the redcoats pouring down the slope in front of him; every one was going forward, and the enemy's cannonade had ceased. A wounded soldier close by him groaned and turned heavily on his side. Bill tried to pull himself together to walk, but his right leg was useless, and he could only crawl. He crawled to the edge of the bank and found himself close to the nest; he put his hand in and found two warm eggs and two nestlings. Then he slipped down the bank and fainted at the bottom.

A fortnight afterwards, the old parson came down to his garden-gate with a letter in his hand, and stepped across to the thatched cottage.

Bill's mother met him at the door with a curtsey and a pale face.

"It's his own writing," said the parson, "so don't be frightened. Shall I read it you?" And he opened and read the letter; here is a faithful copy of it—

"BRUSSLES OSPITLE, *June* 22.

"DEAR MOTHER,—We ave won a glorous Victry, and old Bony and all of em they run away at last. I see em a runnin just as I got nocked over my dear mother I did for some on em but don't know how many twas, them cavalry chaps mostly twas as I nocked over I be rather smartish badly hit dear mother the Doctor ave took off my rite Leg but I feels as if twur thur still it do hurt so tell passon I found a Lark's nestie as I didn't never take none of the eggs on twur a marvelous wunder as they warn't scruncht with them Frenchies a gallopin over the place and our fellows wen they sent em a runnin tell passon as the Lord do love me I partly thinks I carn't rite no more dear mother but I'm a comin ome soon as I'm better so no more now from y^{r} affexnit son

"BILL."

The letter was read a hundred times, and laid carefully away when all the village had seen it. But the lad never came home; he lies in the cemetery at Brussels. The Larks brought up their young, and sang even while the dead were being buried; then they left the terrible field of Waterloo, and never dared return to it.

THE SORROWS OF A HOUSE MARTIN

LITTLE Miss Gwenny was sitting alone in the garden, taking her tea. Her comfortable little garden chair was placed under the projecting eaves on the shady side of the Parsonage; the unclipped jessamine that climbed up the wall was clustering round her, and a soft breeze was stirring its long shoots, and gently lifting the little girl's long hair with the same breath. She looked the picture of comfort and enjoyment.

On the table by her side were the tea-tray and a well-worn copy of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland." She was not reading, however, though now and then she turned over the pages and looked at a picture. Except when she did so, she kept her eyes half closed, and leaning back in her chair gazed sleepily into the garden

[Face p. 24.

The Sorrows of a House-Martin.

through her drooping eyelashes. The fact was that she was every minute expecting something wonderful to happen. What it would be she could not in the least guess ; but that lovely September day it really seemed as if there might be fairyland in the garden at last. Twice before during that summer she had contrived to have the garden to herself, without fear of interruption from parents, brothers, servants, or visitors ; but nothing wonderful had happened, and this would probably be her last chance before cold and wet set in.

But in spite of her tea and her book and her beloved solitude, Miss Gwenny was not at this moment in quite such a happy frame of mind as to deserve to have her garden turning into fairyland. Several things had happened to vex her ; and when one is vexed it is too much to expect White Rabbits or Cheshire Cats or Mock Turtles or March Hares to wait upon one at pleasure and tell their tales. It was true indeed that her brothers were well out of the way at a cricket-match, and that her father and mother had just set out on a long drive, taking with

them the manservant, who was always spoiling her plans by poking about in the garden with his tools. But this same man had spitefully (so she thought) locked up the tool-house before he went away, and it was just this very tool-house on which she had been setting her heart all the morning. There she could not possibly be seen either from the road or the windows, while she could herself see enough of the garden to catch sight of anything wonderful that might come; and there too she had some property of her own in a dark corner, consisting of a dormouse, the gift of her brothers, and sundry valuable odds and ends, with which she might amuse herself if nothing did come.

And this was not the only thing that troubled her. She had heard her mother say that she was going to ask Aunt Charlotte to look in and see after Gwenny: and Gwenny did not want, I grieve to say, to be seen after by Aunt Charlotte. That kind lady was sure to stay a long time in the garden fidgeting with the rose-trees, and collecting snails and caterpillars in an old tin pan. These creatures she

always carefully killed, to the great delight of the boys, by pouring boiling water on them, and she had more than once sent Gwenny to the kitchen to fetch a kettle for this purpose. Gwenny secretly determined to rebel if such were her lot this afternoon; for how could there be fairyland in the garden if all the animals were killed? And every minute she was expecting to hear the latch of the gate lifted, and the quick decided step of her aunt coming up the garden path.

Several times as she sat there a quick shadow had passed over the white page of her book, but she did not notice it, nor did she heed a continuous quiet chatter that was going on over her head. At last, just as she happened to turn to the page on which is the picture of the Duchess carrying the pig-baby, the shadow hovered for a moment and darkened the leaf, so that she looked up with a little frown on her face.

"Everything teases me this afternoon!" she exclaimed. But the House Martin, whose shadow had disturbed her, had flown into his nest with food for his young ones. Gwenny

watched for his coming out again, and listened to the chattering that was going on in the nest. She could just see his tail, and the bright white patch above it, as he clung to the door of his nest up there under the eaves. Presently he came out, and then she watched for his return; and soon, so constant was the hovering and chattering, that Aunt Charlotte, and the gardener, and fairyland itself, were all forgotten, and she began, after her own odd fashion, to talk to the Martins in a dreamy way.

"What busy people you are!" she said, very softly, so as not to disturb them: "how tired you must get, fussing about like that all day long! Fancy if my mother had to run round the garden twenty times before giving me anything to eat! That would be more in Aunt Charlotte's way, wouldn't it? I won't get the boiling water today,—or at least I'll spill it. You look very happy, gossiping away all day, with a nest full of young to look after; anyhow it's lucky for you that you can't be caught, and have boiling water poured on you. She'd do it if she could,

though. Yes, you are certainly very happy; you don't come back to your nest and find it locked up like my tool-house. How you do skim about, like fish swimming in the air! And how nice and clean you are!—though I did see you grubbing in the mud the other day on the road. I say, I should like to be you instead of *me*, with all sorts of things to worry me."

At this moment a Martin stopped to rest on a bare twig of the apple-tree which grew close to the house and almost touched it; and at once fell to ruffling up its feathers, and pecked at them with great energy.

"What are you doing that for?" asked Gwenny, watching in a lazy way, with her eyes half closed.

The Martin seemed to take no notice, but clinging to his twig with some difficulty against the rising breeze (for his feet were not much used to perching) he went on diligently searching his feathers with his bill.

"What are you doing that for?" asked Gwenny again, rousing herself. And recollecting her manners, she added, "If you will be

kind enough to tell me, I should really like to know, because, you see, I'm interested in all the animals in our garden."

"That's easily answered," said the Martin: "it's only because these things I'm pecking at tease me so."

"Tease you!" cried Gwenny. "Why, I was just thinking that you had nothing in the world to tease you. I'm sure you look as happy as the day is long. I have so many little things to worry me, you see!"

"Dear little Gwenny!" said the Martin, after a pause, "so you have your troubles too! Do you know, I've seen you here every summer since you were hardly big enough to toddle about the garden, and I should have thought you were the happiest little girl in the world."

Gwenny shook her head sadly; and indeed at that moment she heard the latch of the gate lifted. But it was only the postman, and there was no sign yet of Aunt Charlotte. The Martin went on:

"And do you really think that a House Martin has not troubles? Why, dear me, to think only

of these ticks! There are half a dozen in each feather, I really believe; and if you had to count my feathers, it would be your bedtime long before you got through half of them. I could sit here by the hour together hunting for them, if I hadn't plenty of other work to do. You can't think how they fidget one, tickling and creeping all day long! And the nest up there is swarming with them! Have you got ticks under your feathers, I wonder?"

"Don't talk of such horrid things," said Gwenny. "Of course I haven't. Please don't fly down: you might drop some about. I had no idea you were such nasty creatures!"

"Speak gently, please," returned the Martin. "It's not our fault. They will come, and there's not a Martin in the world that hasn't got them. You see we have our troubles; and you are a very lucky little girl. You have no ticks, and no journeys to make, and no droughts to go through, and no sparrows to bully you, and no men or cats to catch and kill you. Dear me," he added with a sigh, "such a spring and summer as my wife and I have had! Troubles

on troubles, worries on worries—and, depend upon it, we haven't seen the end of it yet. But it's no good talking about it. When one is worried the best thing is to be as busy as possible. So I had better say goodbye and get to work again." And he fluttered off his perch.

"No, don't go," said Gwenny. "Tell me all about it; I'm sure it'll do you good. I always go and tell some one when I get into trouble."

So the Martin began, while Gwenny arranged herself comfortably as for a story, while the breeze blew the brown locks all about her face.

"The wonder is," he said, "that I am here at all. Every year it seems more astonishing, for half the Martins that nested in the village in my first summer are dead and gone. And indeed our numbers are less than they used to be; we have to face so many troubles and perils. When we left Africa last spring——"

"Why did you leave it?" asked Gwenny. "If you will make such terribly long journeys, (and I

know you do, for father told us) why do you ever come back? Of course we're very glad to see you here," she added, with an air of politeness caught from her mother, "but it seems to me that you are very odd in your ways."

The Martin paused for a moment. "I really don't quite know," he presently said; "I never thought about it: we always do come here, and our ancestors always came, so I suppose we shall go on doing it. Besides, this is really our home. We were born here, you see, and when the heat begins in South Africa there comes a strange feeling in our hearts, a terrible home-sickness, and we *must* go."

"Then when you are once at home, why do you leave it to go away again so far?" asked Gwenny.

"My dear," said the Martin, "if you will listen, and not ask so many questions beginning with 'why,' you may possibly learn something about it. Let me begin again. When we left Africa this year we went our usual way by some big islands in a broad blue sea, where we can rest, you know, and stay a day or two to recruit

ourselves, — and then we made another sea-passage, and came to land near a large and beautiful town, with great numbers of ships lying in its harbour. Of course we are not afraid of towns or men : we have always found men kind to us, and willing to let us build our nests on their houses. Long ago, you know, we used to build in rocks, and so we do now in some places ; but when you began to build houses of stone we took to them very soon, for then there was plenty of room for all of us, and no one to persecute us either, as the hawks used to do in the rocky hills. But really I begin to fear we shall be obliged to give it up again one of these days."

"Why?" said Gwenny. "Don't think of such a thing, now we're friends. Why should you?"

"If you want to know why," continued the Martin, "you must wait a little till I get on with my story. When we reached that fine town with the ships, we rested, as we always do, on any convenient place we can find,—chimneys, towers, telegraph wires ; and of course as we come in thousands and much about the same

time, the people look out for us, and welcome us. So they used to, at least: but of late years something has possessed them,—I don't know what,—and they have set themselves to catch and kill us. It may be only a few wicked persons: but this year nearly all those towers and wires were smeared with some dreadful sticky stuff, which held us fast when we settled on it, until rough men came along and seized us. Hundreds and thousands of us were caught in this way and cruelly killed, and will never see their old home again."

"Horrible!" cried Gwenny. "I believe I know what that was for: I heard mother reading about it in the paper. They wanted to sell the birds to the Paris milliners to put on ladies' bonnets. But how did you escape?"

"Only by a miracle," said the bird. "And indeed I do wonder that I'm safe here; I alighted on a tall iron fence near the sea, and instantly I felt my claws fastened to the iron,—not a bit would they move. A few yards off were two or three of my friends just in the same plight; and after a time of useless struggling, I

saw to my horror a man come along, with a boy carrying a big bag. As the fence was high, he carried a pair of steps, and when he came to the other birds, he put these down and mounted them. Then he seized my poor friends, gave their necks a twist, and dropped them into the bag, which the boy held open below. It was sickening: I could see one or two which he had not quite killed struggling about at the bottom of the bag. Poor things, poor things! And there was I just as much at the mercy of these ruffians, and my turn was to come next."

"It's too horrible," said Gwenny: "I wonder you can bear to tell it."

"Ah, my dear," said the Martin, "we have to get hardened to these things. And it's good for you to hear my story, as you thought our lives were all happiness. Well, the man came along to me with his steps, and I struggled, and he chuckled, and in another moment it would have been all over. But just as he was going to grip me, he noticed that his boy was not below with the bag, and turning round he saw him a little way off in the road practising standing on

his head, while the bag was lying in the dust with its mouth open. He shouted angrily, scolded the boy, and bade him bring back the bag directly; and when he came, gave him a kick in the back that made him squeal. Then he turned round again, seized me with a rough dirty hand, and wrenched my claws loose. Oh, the dreadful misery of that moment! But it was only a moment. At the very instant when he got me loose, the steps were pulled from beneath him, and as he struggled to save himself he let go his hold of me. Away I went as fast as I could fly, only looking back for a moment to see the man on his face in the dust, and the boy running away with all his might. I owe my life to that urchin's mischief. He served his master out well, and I hope he didn't get beaten for it afterwards.

"Well, I flew off, as I said, and it was a long time before I rested again. I was afraid that sticky stuff would hold me fast again, and I dipped into the rivers and scraped myself in the dusty roads, till I felt I had pretty well got rid of it. And no other misadventure happened while

we were in France; and then there came a pleasant morning with a gentle breeze, in which we crossed the sea to this dear home of yours and ours, where no one wants to catch and kill us; and then we felt as happy as you fancy we always are. It was mid-April, and your fields looked so fresh and green, we had not seen such a green for nearly a whole year. The sun shone into the grass and lit it up, and forced the celandines and marigolds to open their blossoms all along the valley as we made our way to our old home here. Every now and then a delicious shower would come sweeping down from the west, and the labouring men would get under a tree, and throw old sacks over their shoulders to keep them dry; and the gentlefolk out walking in the roads would put up their umbrellas and run for it. But we,—ah! how we did enjoy those showers after the long weary journey! We coursed about and chatted to each other, and greeted our friends the Sand Martins by the river bank, knowing that the sun would be out again in a few minutes, and would bring all sorts of juicy insects out of the moistened grass.

And when the rain had passed, and the blue sky above was all the bluer for the dark cloud in the distance, where the rainbow was gathering its brightness, what delicious feasts we had! how we did career about, and chatter, and enjoy ourselves!"

"I daresay you did," said Gwenny. "And I'm very glad you are happy some time: but I'm sure there's something dreadful coming yet!"

"Only too soon there came something dreadful," the Martin continued,—"dreadful to us at least. The very next day—the day we came here—the soft west wind dropped, and no more showers came. Quite early in the morning I felt a difference—a dryness about the skin, and a tickling at the roots of my feathers, which I knew was not caused by those little creepers I told you of. And when I rested on the telegraph wires to scratch myself with my bill, I got so cold that I had to leave off and take to flight again. And then I knew that the wind was in the *east*, and that I should get very little good by flying, though fly I must, for the insects would not rise. Those of yesterday were dead already,

nipped with a single night's frost, and there was no sun to bring new ones to life. But we managed to get on fairly that day, and hoped that the east wind would be gone the next morning."

"Why, what a difference the east wind does make to some people!" put in Gwenny. "You're just like Aunt Charlotte; whenever she's sharper than usual, my mother says it's the east wind, and so it is, I believe. It dries up the snails, so that they go under the bushes, and she can't find them. That's the only way I can tell an east wind: the snails go in, and Aunt Charlotte gets put out."

"Then Aunt Charlotte must have been very cross last spring," said the Martin; "and so were we, and very wretched too. It lasted quite three weeks, and how we contrived to get through it I hardly know. Some of us died—the weaker ones—when it turned to sleeting and freezing; and when the Swifts came early in May they had a dreadful time of it, poor creatures, for they are very delicate and helpless, in spite of their long wings. There were no flies to be had, except in

one or two places, and there we used all to go, and especially to that long strip of stagnant water which the railway embankment shelters from the east. We used to fly up and down, up and down, over that dreary bit of water: but to collect a good beakful of flies used to take us so long that we had often to rest on the telegraph wires before it was done, and we got so cold and so tired that we could only fly slowly, and often felt as if we should have to give in altogether."

"I saw you," said Gwenny; "I watched you ever so long one day, and I was quite pleased because I could see the white patches over your tails so nicely; you flew so slowly, and sometimes you came along almost under my feet."

"And I saw you," returned the Martin, "one day, but one day only; for you caught your bad cold that very day while you were watching us; and the next time I saw you, when I peeped in at the window as I was looking for my old nest, you were in bed, and I could hear you sneezing and coughing even through the window panes. It was a bad time for all of us, my dear."

"Well, I don't know," said Gwenny. "I don't much mind staying in bed, especially in an east wind, because then Aunt Charlotte stops at home, and can't——"

"Never mind Aunt Charlotte," said the Martin. "She'll be here directly, and you mustn't say unkind things of her. I can feel with her, poor thing, if she lives on snails like the thrushes, and can't catch them in an east wind."

Gwenny was about to explain, but the Martin said "Hush!" and went on with his tale, for he was aware that it was getting rather long, and that Aunt Charlotte might be expected at any moment.

"At last the east wind went, and then for a while we had better luck. Rain fell, and the roads became muddy, and we set to work to rebuild our nest. For you must know that it was one of our bits of bad luck this year that our dear old nest had been quite destroyed when we returned, and instead of creeping into it to roost during that terrible east wind, as we like to do, we had to find some other hole or corner

to shelter us. You see your home is our home too; and how would you like to have to sleep in the tool-house, or under the gooseberry bushes in the garden?"

"I should love to sleep in the tool-house," said Gwenny, "at least, if I could have my bed in there. But I didn't know you slept in your old nests, nor did father, I am sure, or he would have taken care of them when the workmen were here painting the window-frames and the timbers under the roof."

"I thought that was how it was done," said the Martin; "they like to make everything spick and span, and of course our nests look untidy. Well, it can't be helped; but it was bad luck for us. We went to work all the same, gathering up the mud in our bills, and laid a fresh foundation, mixing it with a little grass or straw to keep it firm."

"Like the Israelites when they had to make bricks!" cried Gwenny.

"Just so," said the Martin, though he did not quite understand. "And all was going on nicely, and my wife up there was quite in a

hurry to lay her eggs, and we were working like bees, when out came the sun, and shone day after day without a cloud to hide him, and all the moisture dried up in the roads, and our foundations cracked and crumbled, because we could get no fresh mud to finish the work with. We made long journeys to the pond in the next village and to the river bank, but it was soon all no good; the mud dried in our very mouths and would not stick, and before long there was nothing soft even on the edge of pond or river —nothing but hard-baked clay, split into great slits by the heat."

"Why, we could have watered the road for you, if we had known," said Gwenny.

"Yes, my dear, to be sure; but then you never do know, you see. We know a good deal about you, living as we do on your houses; we know when you get up (and very late it is) and when you go to bed, and a great deal more that you would never expect us to know; but you know very little about us, or I should not be telling you this long story. Of course you might know, if you thought it worth while; but

very few of you take an interest in us, and I'm sure I don't wonder."

"Why don't you wonder?" asked Gwenny.

"Because we are not good to eat," said the Martin decisively. "Don't argue," he added, as he saw that she was going to speak: "think it over, and you'll find it true. I must get on. Well, we waited patiently, though we were very sad, and at last came the rain, and we finished the nest. Ah! how delicious the rain is after a drought! You stay indoors, poor things, and grumble, and flatten your noses against the nursery windows. We think it delightful, and watch the thirsty plants drinking it in, and the grass growing greener every minute; it cools and refreshes us, and sweetens our tempers, and makes us chatter with delight as we catch the juicy insects low under the trees, and fills us with fresh hope and happiness. Yes, we had a few happy days then, though we little knew what was coming. An egg was laid, and my wife nestled on it, and I caught flies and fed her,—and soon another egg was laid, and then, —then came the worst of all."

The Martin paused and seemed hardly able to go on, and Gwenny was silent out of respect for his feelings. At last he resumed.

"One afternoon, when the morning's feeding was over, I flew off, so joyful did I feel, and coursed up and down over meadow and river in the sunshine, till the lengthening shadows warned me that my wife would be getting hungry again. I sped home at my quickest pace, and flew straight to the nest. If I had not been in such a hurry I might have noticed a long straw sticking out of it, and then I should have been prepared for what was coming; but I was taken by surprise, and I never shall forget that moment. I clung as usual to the nest, and put my head in before entering. It was a piteous sight I saw! My wife was not there; the eggs were gone; and half a dozen coarse white feathers from the poultry yard told me what had happened. Before I had time to realise it, I heard a loud fierce chatter behind me, felt a punch from a powerful bill in my back, which knocked me clean off the nest, and as I flew screaming

away, I saw a great coarse dirty sparrow, with a long straw in his ugly beak, go into the nest just as if it were his own property. And indeed it now was his property, by right of wicked force and idle selfishness; for as long as I continued to hover round, he sat there looking out, his cruel eyes watching me in triumph. I knew it was no good for me to try and turn him out, for I should never have lived to tell you the story. Look at my bill! it's not meant to fight with, nor are my claws either. We don't wish to fight with any one; we do no one any harm. Why should we be bullied and persecuted by these fat vulgar creatures, who are too lazy to build nests for themselves? Up there at the farm-house they have turned every one of us out of house and home, and I daresay that next year we shall have to give up your snug house too. You could prevent it if you liked, but you take no notice, and you think us always happy!"

This was too much for poor Gwenny, and the tears began to fall. "No, no," she implored, "you *shall* come here again, you *must* come here

down the lane, hastened to open the gate and welcome Gwenny's father and mother.

Gwenny looked up at the Martin's nest and nodded her thanks; and then she too ran to the gate, and seizing her father with both hands, danced him down the garden, and told him she had made a promise, which he must help her to keep. It was an hour before they came in again, looking as if they had greatly enjoyed themselves. Aunt Charlotte had gone home again, and the snails were left in peace. And as the Martin flew out of his nest, and saw Gwenny and her father watching him, he knew that the promise would be kept.

THE SANDPIPERS

FRESH and sweet from its many springs among the moors, where the Curlew and the Golden Plover were nesting, the river came swiftly down under the steep slopes of the hills; pausing here and there in a deep, dark pool under the trees, into which the angler would wade silently to throw his fly to the opposite bank, and then hurrying on for a while in a rapid flow of constant cheerful talk. Then making for the other side of its valley, it quieted down again in another deep pool of still water: and, as the valley opened out, it too spread itself out over a pebbly bed, welcoming here another stream that rushed down from the hills to the west.

Just here, where winter floods had left a wide space of stones and rubbish between the water and the fields, and before the river gathered itself

together again for a swift rush into another pool, a pair of Sandpipers had made their scanty nest and brought up their young in safety for two years running. And here they were again, this last June, safely returned from all the perils of travel, and glorying in a nestful of four large and beautiful eggs of cream colour spotted with reddish-brown blotches. The nest was out of reach even of the highest flood, but within hearing of the river's pleasant chat: for without that in their ears the old birds could not have done their work, nor the young ones have learnt the art of living. It was placed among the bracken under an old thorn-bush, on the brink of a miniature little precipice some four feet high, the work of some great flood that had eaten out the shaly soil.

The Sandpipers felt no fear, for there was no village at hand, and hardly a boy to hunt for nests: the fishermen kept to the bank of the river or waded in it, and only glanced for a moment in admiration at the graceful figure of the male bird, as he stood bowing on a stone in mid-stream, gently moving body and tail up

[*Face p.* 52

THE SANDPIPERS.

and down in rhythmical greeting to the water that swirled around him, and piping his musical message to the wife sitting on her eggs near at hand.

One day when he was thus occupied, before making a fresh search for food for her, an answering pipe from the nest called him to her side. He guessed what it was, for hatching time was close at hand. When he reached the nest, he found that inside the first egg that had been laid a tiny echo of his own clear pipe was to be heard. Whether you or I could have heard it I cannot say; but to the keen ears of the parents it was audible enough, and made their hearts glow with the most delightful visions of the future. And this hidden chick was wonderfully lively and talkative, more so than any chick of theirs had been before he came out into the world. It was quite unusual for a Sandpiper, and both the parents looked a little serious. Nor was their anxiety allayed when the egg-shell broke, and a little black eye peered out full of life and mischief.

Then out came a head and neck, and then a

sticky morsel of a mottled brown body, which almost at once got its legs out of the shell, and began to struggle out of the nest. Was ever such a thing known before? The old birds knew not whether to laugh or cry, but they hustled him back into the nest in double quick time, and made him lie down till the sun and air should have dried him up a little. Hard work the mother had of it for the next day or two to keep that little adventurer under her wing while the other eggs were being hatched. When he was hungry he would lie quiet under her wing; but no sooner had his father come with food for him than he would utter his little pipe and struggle up for another peep into the wide world. Terrible stories his mother told him of infant Sandpipers who had come to untimely ends from disobeying their parents.

One, she told him, had made off by himself one day while his mother was attending to his brothers and sisters, and before he had gone many yards along the pleasant green sward, a long red creature with horrible teeth and a tuft to his tail, had come creeping, creeping, through

the grass, and suddenly jumped upon him. His mother heard his cries, and flew piping loudly to the spot; but it was too late, and she had to watch the cruel stoat bite off his head and suck his blood. Another made off towards the water and was crushed under foot by an angler who was backing from the river to land a fish, and never even knew what he had done. Another fell into a deep hole at nightfall and could not get out again, and was found starved and dead when morning came.

After each of these stories the little bird shuddered and crouched under his mother's wing again: but the mastering desire to see the world always came back upon him, and great was the relief of the parents when the other eggs were hatched and education could begin. Then the nest was soon abandoned, and the little creatures trotted about with their mother; for they are not like the ugly nestlings that lie helpless and featherless in their nests for days and days, as human babies lie in their cradles for months. Life, and manners, and strength, and beauty, come almost at once on the young Sandpipers,

as on the young pheasants and partridges and chickens. And their education is very easy, for they seem to know a good deal already about the things of the world into which they have only just begun to peep.

So one lovely day in June the whole family set out for the bank of the river, the young ones eager to learn, and the old ones only too anxious to teach. For what they had to learn was not merely how to find their food—that they would soon enough discover for themselves—but what to do in case of danger; and as they tripped along, the mother in her delicate grey dress, white below with darker throat and breast, and the young ones in mottled grey and brown, so that you could hardly tell them among the pebbles and their shadows, she gave them their first lesson, while the father flew down the river and back again to exercise his wings and to look for food.

They had not gone far when suddenly their mother cried "wheet whee-t" with an accent they already knew, and flew away from them, calling loudly as she went. The little ones,

unable to fly, did the first thing that came into their heads (and it seemed to come into all their little heads at one moment), and dropped down among the pebbles motionless, with eyes shut. There they stayed some time, and the eldest, getting tired of this, at last opened a bright black eye, and turned it upwards. There, far up above them, hovering with poised wings, was a Kestrel clearly marked against the sky. The little black eye closed again, and there they waited without moving till at last the mother returned.

"Well done, my dears," she said, "that was a good beginning; there was no great danger, for the Kestrel would hardly be looking for you among these stones; but do that as you did it then whenever I make that call to you; drop exactly where you may be, and shut your eyes. All together and side by side, if you are together when I call; and when I fly round above you, still calling, creep into any holes you see, or under a stone or a tuft of grass, and wait there till I come again. Now the hawk has gone, so we may go on to the water."

There was no need to bid them go; had not

the noise of that water been in their ears ever since they broke their shells, telling them all the secrets of their life? And had not their mother told them wonderful things of it—of the food about its banks, and on its stones, and in its shallows, the cool refreshing air that breathes from it, the lights and shadows that play on it, and above all, the endless music without which a Sandpiper could hardly live?

"You cannot fly yet," she told them, "but we will go to the water's edge, and then your father and I will show you how to enjoy it." And as just then it came in sight, she opened her wings and flew out on it piping, while the little ones opened their wings too in vain, and hurried on to the edge, and watched her as she alit on a stone, and bowed gracefully to the dancing water. And they too bowed their tiny bodies and felt the deliciousness of living.

All that livelong day, a day no one of them ever forgot, they spent by the river side, dabbling their little dark-green legs in the water when an eddy sent it gently up to them, learning to find the sweetest and wholesomest insects lurking

among the pebbles, with now and then a little worm, or caterpillar that had fallen from the bushes above: watching the trout turning up their golden sides in the dark water of the pool as they rose to the flies: practising their voices in a feeble piping, and always moving bodies and tails as they saw their parents do it.

They had very few alarms, but quite enough for practice in hiding. Once as they were following their mother by the very edge of the deep pool, a huge silver creature, flashing in the sunlight, leapt clean out of the water and fell in again with a splash. The little ones all dropped to ground and lay silent, but their mother never uttered a note, and they soon got up again. She told them it was only a salmon, who could not possibly do them any harm, and would not if he could; that she and their father were good friends with the salmon, and often sat on the big boulder under which he loved to lie; but that it was only a bowing acquaintance, because the salmon could not talk their language.

Once or twice an angler came along slowly, and then they had to drop while their parents

flew up and down stream loudly calling; but there was always plenty of time for them to get into holes and corners safely, and the anglers passed on again without noticing either young or old. At last the light began to fade, the young ones were tired and sleepy—even the eldest, who had distinguished himself by trying to fly, and actually getting out on a stone half a foot from the shore, where he stood bowing with great pride till his father came and shoved him into the water to scramble ashore in a fright—and so this delightful day came to an end, and they all went back to the shelter where the nest was placed.

The next day was a Sunday, and they spent half the morning in great happiness without seeing a single fisherman. But after all they were to learn this day that life has its troubles: for a huge heron took it into his head to fish while human beings could not, and alighted at the water's edge within a dozen yards of the spot where they were already motionless in obedience to their mother's signal pipe. And there the great bird kept standing on one leg

for a full hour, and would not move a muscle, except when now and then he darted his long bill into the water, and then heaved it up into the air with a trout struggling at the end of it. At last, as his back was turned to them, their parents whistled them away, and they crept back to the nest in deep disappointment.

"Why should we be afraid of that creature?" asked the eldest: "he eats fish, not Sandpipers."

"Let him see you, my child," said the father, "and he'll snap you up with that long bill of his as quick as a trout can snap a fly. There was a wild duck up the stream which had a nice little family just learning to swim, when down came a heron before they could hide themselves—and indeed they can't hide themselves so well, poor things, as you have learnt to—and he just took those ducklings one after another, and made such a good meal of them that he went away without stopping to fish, and the poor parents had to make another nest and go through their work all over again."

So they had to stop at home while the heron

was there, and it was past midday when at last he flew away. Then out they came again, and were making their way with glad hearts down to the water, when the warning "wheet-whee-et" was heard very loud indeed. Down they all went, in a row together, on the bit of shaly bank where they were running at the moment. And now they knew that there was indeed danger; for the old birds flew piping wildly up and down as they had never yet heard them, and close by they could hear some great creature trampling about all around, and searching every bit of stone and grass and bush. Once they felt its shadow come over them, and could hear it breathing within a yard or two of them. Then it went away, letting the sun come on them again; but their parents kept up their wild piping, and they knew that the danger was still there. Then more searching and shuffling and routing, and once more the shadow came upon them, and the footsteps crunched the shale on which they lay. And now, as ill-luck would have it, the eldest opened one black eye and looked out of the corner of it. In another moment he felt himself seized

in a mighty grasp, but not ungently, and lifted high into the air, while in wildest consternation the old birds flew close around him.

It was a terrible moment, but the little bird was plucky, and something in the way he was held told him that he was not going to be eaten. He opened both eyes, and saw one of those human anglers, without his rod. The great animal handled him gently, stroked his plumage, and looked him all over, and then put him softly down beside his brothers and sisters, who were still motionless but palpitating. He stood there for a minute or two gazing at them, no doubt in wonder and admiration, and then hastened away towards the farmhouse under the hill. The little birds began to move again.

"Whisht, wheet, wheet," cried their mother; "it's not all over yet. He wouldn't have gone so fast if he hadn't meant to come back again. Get into holes and corners, quick!"

"I don't mind if he does come back again," said the eldest. "He didn't hurt me. His great claw was warm and comfortable, and he stroked my down the right way. I looked up and saw

his great eye: it was like the salmon's, only pleasanter."

"Holes and corners, quick, quick, quick, wheet, whee-et," cried both parents again in dismay at the folly of their eldest; and all four crept up the shaly ledge and hid themselves under tufts of grass and bits of stick. It was none too soon, for the footsteps were now heard again, and the creaking of a gate as the angler got over it. And this time he was not alone; another human creature was with him. They came up to the spot, glanced at the frightened parents with admiration, and then looked for the young ones.

"Well, this is provoking," said the one who had been there before; "if they haven't gone and hid themselves away! Here have I dragged you from your comfortable pipe for nothing at all! They're not far off, though, or the old birds would not be here." And stooping down, he examined the ground carefully.

At that moment that perverse eldest chick, conscious that his right leg was sticking out into the sunshine, instinctively drew it in under him,

and doing so, he again caught the angler's eye. And he had to be pulled out of his hiding-place with rather more force than he liked. The angler put him into his friend's hands, and for a moment the audacious chick was frightened. But he was soon down in his cover again safe and sound; and then the rest were found and admired, and the big creatures turned to go away.

"Wait a minute, though," said the angler, pausing; "let us sit down a bit and see what they will do. My dears," (addressing the old birds,) "you must put up with a little more anxiety, and then you shall be happy for ever afterwards, if you can." So the two human beings sat down on the stones and watched, while the old birds flew round piping, perching here and there and bowing, and giving them such pictures of grace and beauty as they were not likely soon to see again. And neither of them can ever forget the charm of that quarter of an hour; the music of the river, the fragrance of the scented fern, the outlines of the rocky hills against the sky, and the gentle grace of the pair

of little grey fairies that flew around them piping, less timid now that they saw no chance of harm to their brood.

At last, urged by some signal from the parents, the little birds all came out of their holes and corners, and trotted along one after another, the eldest leading, right under the very eyes of the two men. Piping faintly as if to call attention to their beauty, and moving tails and bodies like their parents, they passed along the shaly bank till they reached the roots of an old battered thorn-bush, where they disappeared into a hole and were seen no more by the human eyes.

After this adventure the old Sandpipers had a long talk. All had gone well so far; but it would not do to run these risks any longer if they could help it. And not without some misgivings as to the difficulty of the task, they determined to get the young ones across the river without delay; for on the further side some jutting rocks made it impossible for anglers to pass, and they were seldom seen there.

So next morning at break of day the little family was called down to the water's edge,

and told that they must do exactly as they were bid, and not be frightened. The father crouched down among the pebbles, and the mother bade the eldest chick mount upon his back, and stick his three long toes, whose claws were already beginning to get strong, fast into the soft and yielding plumage. This he did in a moment, and the next one found him shooting across the narrow head of the pool, with its rush of tumbled water, and landed safely at the foot of the rock. It was a delightful sensation, and as the father opened his wings and sped back again to fetch the others, the little one opened his too, and felt almost as if he could do it by himself. Then one after another the three younger ones were carried over, piping faintly from fear, and clinging for their lives to their perilous perch. And lastly came the mother with kind words of praise for all, and they set out to enjoy themselves for a whole long day of peace and plenty.

And indeed in peace and plenty they passed many days without further troubles or adventures, while the little wings began to put out

their quill feathers, and the little voices to gain in strength and tone. And all this time the sun shone and the river sang a quiet song, as it slowly sank for want of rain, leaving new and varied margins of sand and pebbles for the Sandpipers to search for food.

But one morning the sun did not greet them as usual with his warmth; the sky was grey and streaky, and seemed to hang lower over the hills than when it was all clear blue. At first all was still and silent, but presently a gust of wind came up the river, and then another as suddenly came down, worrying the early angler on the opposite bank, and teasing the little Sandpipers as it blew their soft plumage the wrong way. And then a large white bird sailed gracefully up the valley, balancing itself against the wind, to the great admiration of the chicks.

"That is a Seagull, children," said the mother, "and you will see plenty of them when you cross the sea to the warm southern lands for the winter. And he is telling us that there is a storm coming—listen!"

And they listened to the melancholy wail of the great bird, but felt no fear of him, for the parent birds showed none. But the old ones knew the meaning of that sad music, and thought of the weary waste of sea over which they would soon have to pass, and the sudden squall at night, and the loss of old friends and comrades.

Before the morning was out the storm began in earnest, and the chicks, after enjoying the first soothing rain for a while, were hustled under the shelter of the big rock, and crept into a hole to leeward. The eldest of course was the last to go in; for as a sudden strong gust swept past him, he opened his growing wings, and to his great delight found himself carried off his legs and almost flying. But the watchful father had seen him, and in a moment was ahead of him, just as he was being carried out upon the stream.

"Back into the hole!" he called with real anger; "look at the river! Even if you could use those wings as you think you can, it would be unsafe for you in wind and flood." And the little bird looked at the water, and saw that it

was coming much faster than he had ever seen it, and its voice was deeper and hoarser; for far away up on the hills the great storm was already travelling round and round, and the growling of its thunder mixed ominously with the deepening tone of the river. So he crept into the hole and lay down by the others; and they all listened to the fearful splashing of the rain, and the scream of the tearing gusts, and the sighing of the trees on the hill above them. From time to time the old birds went out to get food for themselves and the young, and perhaps, too, to enjoy the freshening moisture, and the towzling worry of the wind, as old birds can and may after a long calm and drought. It might have been wiser if one of them had stayed at home; but the young ones were quiet and overawed, and, what was more, they were hungry.

During one of these absences the violence of the storm seemed to abate a little, and the flashes of sudden fire which had been making them shut their eyes came now but very faintly. It was getting towards evening, and the restless

eldest chick wanted badly to be out again, and all the more because he heard the roar of the river below him, and could hear its waves leaping and splashing on the rocky promontory in the side of which they were sheltered. So, without saying a word to the rest, he got up and went out of the hole on to a little ledge of rock which overhung the water.

What a sight it was! Dark-brown water rushing madly down into the pool, carrying with it logs and branches of trees with all the glory of fresh foliage wasted, and then the pool itself no longer golden-brown and clear, but black as ink, and flecked with creamy patches of surf. But the wind seemed lighter, and there were the Sandmartins, who had their nests in the cliff, flitting up and down just over the water as if nothing had happened, and there too was the friendly Grey Wagtail, with his long tail going up and down just the same as ever. Feeling that he might safely see more still, that adventurous young bird trotted round the corner of the ledge.

In a twinkling the wind had carried him off

his feet, and he was flying—really flying for the first time in his life. He needed no teaching in the art—whether he would or no, fly he must. Those growing quills were big enough to carry him along with the wind, and he had only to guide himself as well as he could. It was glorious, and he felt no terror, for there was no time to feel it. Over the black pool, past the foot-bridge, over which he shot like one of the Sandmartins which he had so often watched with envy and admiration; over the ford, now impassable, and then, as the river made a sharp curve, over field and hedge to the roaring flood again where it turned once more in the wind's direction. But those weak wings were getting tired, and piping loudly for help, he looked for some safe place to drop upon.

Suddenly the wind fell for an instant, and a puff from the opposite direction brought him to. He was over the very middle of the river: a great boulder, water-splashed, lay just under him. How he managed it I cannot tell, but he dropped exhausted on the rough damp sur-

face of the stone, and felt himself safe at last.

Safe! for the moment perhaps, but what was to become of him? The water was surging and roaring against his boulder: was it going to rise upon him and carry him away helpless? The wind was so strong that to fly up stream was hopeless, and as he sat there exhausted, he felt that he could not even use his wings to get to shore. Uttering from time to time a plaintive "wheet," he clung to the stone with all his might, balancing himself with body and tail against the gusts: not reflecting, nor despairing, but just wondering what would happen.

The Sandmartins shot by overhead, but not one of them seemed to notice him, or to be the least inclined to perch on his stone. A Dipper came slowly up stream against the wind, perched on another stone not far off, bowed repeatedly and went on again. A Grey Wagtail coming down stream in graceful waves of flight, poised himself over the stone, and for a moment actually alighted on it: then, seeing his mate pass down after him, opened his wings and was gone. The

Sandpiper opened his too, but his heart sank within him, and he clung still more passionately to his stone.

Two figures came rapidly up the river-bank, —two drenched human creatures, fighting against the wind, but enjoying it. Just as they came level with the boulder they caught the sound of a faint "whee-et." The angler turned sharp round, and after some search with a fieldglass, discovered the little brown object on the boulder.

"It's a young one," he said to his companion: "it's a veritable infant! And see, it can't fly,— it's clutching at the stone like grim death! By all that's feathered, it must be one of our young friends blown away, for there's no brood between them and this, and the wind's been down stream pretty well all day. I say, we must have him off that somehow." They looked at each other and at the swollen river.

"I'll go," said the friend the next moment: "I'm taller and stronger. I should rather like a towzle, but it won't be easy. I can't try it from above, or I shall come with a bang on the stone:

but there are the stepping-stones just below. I can get out there if I can see them through the flood, and then I sha'n't have above twenty yards to swim."

While he said this he was pulling off his clothes, and then he leapt exuberantly down the bank to the water. Suddenly he stopped. "How am I to bring him back?" he shouted.

The angler was puzzled. To swim in a current like that with a bird in your hand was impossible without crushing it; and a naked man has no pockets. But necessity is the mother of invention. Quick as thought he whipped a casting-line off his hat, taking two flies off it and sticking them into his coat: this he wound round his friend's wrist, and making the end fast, told him to tie it round the bird's leg if he reached him.

Carefully into the water his companion descended, feeling with his hand for the first stepping-stone; then balancing himself between this and the rushing water, he went on to the second. It was teasing work, but he managed the third, the fourth, the fifth, and then it was

high time to swim, for the water was up to his middle and higher, and swayed him to and fro in a way that made the angler watch him eagerly. Then came a splash and a plunge, and his head was seen working up against the current, zigzagging to diminish the force of it. Twenty yards is a long way in such a stream, but if he could once get under the lee of that great boulder he would do. And in something like five minutes he was under the stone, and then on it.

A strange sight it was to see a naked human creature sitting cross-legged on a boulder in such a flood! But he has caught the truant, and now he is tying that handy gut line round his leg. And then, standing up on the boulder, he flings the bird shorewards, one end of the line being still fast round his wrist.

The bird sank on the water, and the man plunged in; fighting with the current that was sweeping him down, he made for the shore, and reached it breathless far below the stepping-stones, where the angler pulled him out of the water as joyfully as he ever pulled a

trout. Then they wound up the line, and sure enough there came ashore at the end of it, a draggled, exhausted, and almost lifeless Sandpiper.

To be carried in a human pocket is not pleasant for a bird, but our young scapegrace was too far gone to trouble himself about it. At his birthplace he was taken out, and there the angler stayed with him, sending his companion home to change. It was getting dark fast, but the old birds were still flying wildly up and down the river, piping loudly in a forlorn hope of finding their young one ere night should wrap the river in darkness. The angler put him down near the water and waited at a little distance.

Ere long his wits came back to him, as the well-known notes told him that he was indeed again near home. And weak as he was, he found strength to send out over the river his own little feeble pipe. In a moment his mother was by his side.

The angler watched them for a moment, and then left them to tell his friend of the good

result of a kindly deed. The next day they had to leave the river and all its delights, and to return to work and duty: but they cannot forget the Sandpipers, nor, when the birds return after their winter sojourn in the far south, will they fail to look out without misgiving for their human friends.

THE LAST OF THE BARONS

I

THE Baron sat perched on an old gnarled oak, gazing across the deep ravine below him, where the noisy river leapt from pool to pool. He had been far over the moorland that day with his wife, searching for a safe nesting-place, and had given up the search in despair and returned to his old home; but the Baroness had dallied and been left behind, and now he was expecting her as the sun began to sink in the west. He sat there silent and sad, the last, so he thought, of an ancient race; his head, almost white with age, slightly bent downwards, and his long forked tail sadly weather-worn and drooping.

It was a fresh evening in early April, and one sweet shower after another had begun to entice

the ferns to uncurl themselves, and the oaks on the rocky slopes of the Kite's fortress to put on their first ruddy hue; and now the showers had passed, and the setting sun was shining full in the old Baron's face as he sat on his bough above the precipices. But neither sun nor shower could rouse him from his reverie.

Suddenly he raised his head and uttered a cry; and at the same moment you might have seen the Baroness gliding slowly over the opposite hill. As she neared him, she stopped in mid-air over the roaring torrent and answered his call; and then he slipped off his bough, like a ship launched into the yielding water, and silently joined her. They flew round and round each other once or twice, and the fisherman on the rocks below looked up and gazed at them with admiration. You could tell them apart without difficulty: the Baroness was the larger bird of the two, and her feathers were in better order—she was still young, not more than twenty or so; while the old Baron looked worn and battered, though the red of his back

[*Face p.* 80.

THE LAST OF THE BARONS.

was brighter, and his fine tail was more deeply forked than that of his lady.

They began to circle round each other slowly, hardly moving their wings, but steering with their long tails, and soon they were far above the isolated hill which was known as the Kite's fortress. Sweeping in great circles higher and higher, they seemed to be ascending for ever into the blue, never to come down again; now and again a white cloud would pass above them, against which their forms looked black and clear-cut, and then it would drift away, and you had to look keenly to see them still sailing slowly round and round, tiny specks in the pure ether.

All this time they were talking about a very important matter; not chattering and fussing, as common birds do—starlings, sparrows, and such low-born creatures—but saying a few words gravely as they neared each other in their great circles of flight, and thinking of the next question or answer as they parted for another sweep.

"Well," said the Baron after a while, "have you found a better place than this, where our

persecutors cannot reach us without risking their miserable lives?"

"No," she answered, "none as good as this, and I have been far over the moors toward the setting sun. There are the crags looking down on the flat country and the sea, but they are not so well wooded, and they are too near that seaside town where we have enemies. I have looked at many other places too, but there were none to please me much."

"I thought so," said the Baron. "I have known all this country, every tree and every crag, since I first learnt to fly on the hill down below; and there is no such place as this. I and my old Baroness brought up many broods here, and now that I have a young wife again, she wanders about and wants to find a new home."

"But men found you out and shot her here," said the Baroness. The Baron sailed away from her in a wide sweep, but soon returned and spoke gravely again.

"Don't talk of that, dear," he said. "I have found another wife, and that was more than I

could expect. I searched far and wide, over land and over sea; I reached the ugly country to the south, where the smoke made my eyes water, and the fields were no longer green, and no mice or beetles were to be found; I turned again for fresher air, and came to a wild and treeless sea-coast, where the Gulls mobbed me and a gun was fired at me: but not one of our kind did I see—only the stupid Buzzards, and a Kestrel or two. I gave it up, and thought I was indeed the last of the Barons."

"And then you found me after all near your old home," said the Baroness, tenderly. "And we have brought up two broods, though what has become of them I know not. And last year we should have done the same, but for the creatures that came up the valley when we were just ready to hatch."

"Ah," sighed the Baron, and swept away again in a grand ascending curve.

"Why should they wish to ruin us?" asked she, as with motionless wings he came near her again. "Do we do them any harm, like the Ravens who dig out the young lambs' eyes, or

the vulgar Jays and Magpies—poachers and egg-stealers?"

"Do them harm?" said the Baron, with anger in his voice. "Look at the white farmhouse down yonder! They are good people that live there, and know us well. For generations my family has been on friendly terms with them; they know we do not steal, or pick the lambs' eyes, and in hard winters they do not grudge us a duckling or two, for if we were to die out it would be bad luck for them. We have our own estate, which seldom fails us; we have the wide moorland and are content with it, and can live on it without meddling with old friends' property, like the Buzzards and the Ravens."

"Then why are those other men so mad against us?" asked the Baroness again. "Is not this our own fortress, our old estate, entailed from father to son as you have so often told me, and called by our name? Why do they come and trouble us?"

"Perhaps the old Raven was right," said the Baron, after a wide sweep; "he told me he had spent years among them as a captive, and had

learnt their language and their notions. A great change, he told me, had come over them in the course of his long life. They are now too much interested in us, he said. Once they did not care at all about us, and then we flourished. Now they are poking and prying everywhere; they run about on all sorts of machines, find us out, and won't let us alone. They go to the ends of the earth to worry us birds, wear our feathers in their hats, and put our skins and our eggs in their museums. It isn't that they hate us, he said: it's much worse than that. No, they pretend to love us, and they show their love by coming and spying after us and watching all we do. They are so fond of us that they can't keep their hands off us; and the harder it is to find us the more trouble they take. Yes, I believe that old Raven was right! Man takes such an interest in us that there will be none of us left soon!"

"Let us try once more," said the Baroness, with all the hopefulness of youth. "Come down and find a tree on the steepest face of the old fortress. It is quite time we were beginning;

the oaks are reddening. Let us do what we can, and hope they will not take an interest in us this year."

The Baron silently assented, glad that the ancestral rock should not be deserted; and descending rapidly, still in circles, they reached it as the sun set. Next morning at daybreak the tree was chosen—an oak, high up on a rocky shelf, looking to the west across the ravine and the tumbling river. And before the sun was high the foundation of the nest was laid.

II

In a close little room, in a narrow little street of a large town, poor Mrs. Lee, pale and worn, and rather acid, was scraping bread and butter for her children's breakfast, and doling out cups of watery tea. Five young ones, of various ages, hungry and untidy, sat expectant round the table. Two places were still vacant; one, the father's, as you might guess from the two letters awaiting him there, and the other for the eldest son, who helped his father in the workshop. In that shop

father and son had been already hard at work for a couple of hours, stuffing an otter which had been brought in the day before.

Now the two came in; the father keen-eyed but sad-looking, the son a big bold lad, the hope of an unlucky family.

Mr. Lee sat down and opened one of the two letters. As he read it, his face grew dark, and his wife watched him anxiously.

"Not an order, Stephen?" she asked.

"O yes, it's an order," he said bitterly; "a very nice order. It's an order to pay up the rent, or quit these premises. Twenty pounds, and arrears five pounds ten. Where am I to get twenty-five pounds just now, I should like to know? Look at the jobs we've had all this last winter, barely enough to feed these little beggars, let alone their clothes. A few miserable king-fishers, and a white stoat or two, and such-like vermin. This otter was a godsend, and I shall only get a guinea for it. There's Lord —— gone round the world, and no orders from him: and young Rathbone killed by the Boers, and no one with any money to spare, or this fellow wouldn't

be pressing so. I tell you, Susan, I don't know how to pay it."

"Well, don't pay it," she said; "it's not worth paying for. Take a house in Foregate Street, where people can see you, if you want to get on; I've told you so again and again. You'll never get new customers in this slum."

"I like to pay my debts," he answered slowly, "and the workshop here is good. But there's one advantage in Foregate Street, Susan: it's nearer the workhouse!"

"Don't talk nonsense before the children, Stephen. What's the other letter?"

"I don't know the hand," he said, fingering it as he drank his tea. "I daresay it's an offer to make me chief stuffer to the British Museum, or —Hallo!"

All eyes were fixed upon him; his teacup descended with a rattle into the saucer. The mother got up and came to look over his shoulder. And this was the letter:—

LONDON, *April* 15, 1901.

SIR,—I learn from my friend Mr. Scotton of Eaton Place that you supplied him a year ago

with a full clutch of British Kite's eggs. I hope you will be able to do the same for me this year, as you know where they are to be obtained. I have in my cabinet full clutches of nearly all the British-breeding birds of prey, but the Kite is now so rare that I had despaired of adding its eggs to my collection till my friend gave me your address. I am ready to offer you twenty-five guineas for a clutch properly authenticated as British, and if you should be able to get me a bird as well I will give you ten guineas more, and employ you to set it up. I trust this offer will be satisfactory to you.

Yours truly,

WILLIAM GATHERUM.

"Satisfactory! I should think so," cried the eldest son.

"Satisfactory! Why, you'll get fifty guineas, if you ask for them, Stephen," said the excited mother.

"Well, we could pay the rent anyhow with what he offers," said Stephen, as he put the letter in his pocket. "But to tell you the truth,

Susan, I don't much like the job. I've a tender feeling about those eggs."

"Don't like the job!" she cried, looking at him almost fiercely. "Why, what's the matter with it? Look at these children—haven't they as much right to be fed as young Kites?" And Stephen, looking on his young birds, felt a twinge at his heart, while the fledglings opened all their young mouths at once in a chorus of protest.

"It's a bad trade," he said at last: "I wish I had never taken it up. So long as I collected in foreign parts, it was all very well, and I was young and independent; but now I'm getting old, Susan, and the travellers won't take me with them; and here in England there's no price for anything but what's a rarity—and rarities do me as much harm as good. I tell you, Susan, those Kite's eggs last year were the very mischief: it got about that I had taken them, and my name's in bad odour with the best naturalists. It's those private collectors, with their clutches and their British-killed specimens that I have to live by now; and a precious

set they are! What'll they do with all their cabinets, I should like to know! Sell them to be scattered all over the place! Stow them away in a garret and forget all about them! Die some day, and have the public-house people picking 'em up cheap at your sale, to put in a glass case in the parlour! It's infernal; I don't like this job, Susan."

Susan's tears were beginning to run down. The sun had shone upon her for a moment, and then suddenly gone behind a cloud again. Two or three of the children, seeing their mother troubled, began to roar. Poor Stephen swallowed his tea, and fled from the confusion to his workshop, followed by his son.

"We must do this job, dad," said Tom, when they were alone.

"I tell you I don't like it, my lad, said his father: "'tis bad for us in the long run, and bad for the Kites too. Your mother will say I am a fool; but there are not half a dozen pairs left in the kingdom, and I can't go and persecute them for these private collectors. There's a lot of nonsense talked about these things—extinction

of birds, and all the rest of it: but the Kites are going sure enough, and I won't have a hand in it."

"We must do this job all the same, this year," said Tom, "for the sake of the rent, and then let 'em alone. We must pay that rent, Kites or no Kites: and see what's to be done next."

"Well then," said his father, "you must go without me. You know where to go. There's no County Council order there against taking the eggs, but all the same, I hope you won't find 'em. Don't take a gun: I won't have the old birds killed, for any collection, public or private."

Great was the rejoicing in the family when Tom was found to be packing up. His mother gave him a few shillings from her scanty stock, and urged him to bring a bird as well as the eggs; but this Tom steadily refused to do. "Dad's tender about it," he said. "We only want the rent, and when that's paid, I shall look out for another start in life."

Stephen Lee sat down and wrote this letter to Mr. Gatherum, which next morning greatly astonished that young gentleman in London.

Sir,—It is true that I robbed a Kite's nest a year ago for your friend Mr. Scotton, and I am sorry I did it, for it was a mean and cruel act in this country, where Kites are almost extinct. Please excuse my freedom.

As I have a wife and six children to feed, and my rent to pay after a bad season, I must accept your offer, and do another mean and cruel act. My wife says that my children have as much right to live as the Kites, and that as I was brought up to this business I must take it as it comes. Women are mostly right when there are children to be thought of, and I must pay my rent. I am sending my son, as I don't relish the job myself.

Your humble servant,

Stephen Lee.

By return of post there came a letter for Stephen, containing a cheque for twenty-five guineas, which he handed to his astonished wife. The letter ran thus:

Dear Sir,—I send you a cheque for present needs. Your feelings do you credit. I showed

your letter to a famous ornithologist, who said that you are a fine fellow, and I am a pestilent one. All I ask of you in return for the cheque is to save the eggs before your son takes them. I am going to Spain, and will send you my skins to set up, and mention your name to others. Let me know as soon as you can whether the eggs are saved.

Yours faithfully,
W. GATHERUM.

Mr. Lee rushed to the nearest telegraph office, and wired after his son, "Hold your hand till I come." Then he put up travelling bag, and went off by the next train for Wales.

III

APRIL was drawing to an end, and the oaks on the Kite's fortress were growing ever ruddier; on the steep mossy slopes among the rocks the ferns were really beginning to uncurl. All was very quiet and peaceful; over the opposite hill a pair of Buzzards soared about unmolested;

the Woodwrens had arrived, to spend the summer among the oaks; the Sandpipers were whistling along the river below, and the trout were lazily rising in the pools among the rocks.

The Baroness was happy and cheerful; the Baron, looking back on the experience of half a century, knew well that a tranquil April does not always lead to a happy May; but he said nothing of his doubts, and encouraged his wife. She had presented him, one after another, with three beautiful eggs; they lay in the nest, which had been built of sticks, and ornamented, according to the ancestral custom of the race, with such pleasing odds and ends as could be found at hand, to occupy her attention during the weary days of her sitting. A long shred of sheep's wool: a fragment of an old bonnet that had been a scarecrow, blown by winter winds from a cottage garden: a damp piece of the *Times* newspaper, in which a fisherman's lunch had been wrapped, containing an account of Lord Roberts' entry into Bloemfontein; such were the innocent spoils collected to amuse the Baroness. She had been greatly tempted by some small linen

put out to dry at the farmhouse; but the Baron kept her away from these treasures, as a needy Peer might keep his Peeress from the jewellers' shops. Such objects, he told her, were dangerous, and might betray them.

So she sat on her beautiful eggs, greenish white with dark red blotches, and contented herself with the *Times* and the scrap of old bonnet, while the Baron sailed slowly round the hill looking out for enemies, or made longer excursions, if all seemed safe, in search of food for his wife. And so far he had seen nothing to alarm him. A fisherman would come up the river now and again, and look up at him with interest as he rested to eat his lunch; but the Baron knew well that fishermen are too busy to be dangerous. Nor was there any other human being to be seen but a farmer on his rough-coated pony, or the parson striding over the hills to visit a distant parishioner.

But one morning in May—a lovely morning, too fresh and clear to last—as the Baron was gliding round and round far above the hill, his keen eye caught a slight movement among the

rocky ridges on its summit. Poised on even wings, his tail deftly balancing him against the breeze, he watched: and soon he knew that he was being watched himself. For a human figure was there, lying on its back in a cleft of the grey rock, and looking up at him with a field-glass. For a long time they watched each other, motionless and in silence; but at last the human creature seemed to weary of it, and rose. A cry escaped the Baron—he could not help it; and from over the craggy side of the fortress came the answering cry of the Baroness as she sat on her treasures.

"Fool that I am," thought the Baron, "I have betrayed her, and she has betrayed the nest." One hope remained; the nest was in a stronger position than last year. On the top of the cliff towards the river no trees could grow; but some fifty feet below there was a mossy ledge on which three oaks had rooted themselves. Then came another ledge with more trees: then a steep space covered with large boulders: and then another cliff falling sheer into a deep pool of the river. In the middle oak on the highest

ledge the nest had been placed; once on the ledge, a clever climber might mount the tree, but to get there was no easy matter, and a fall from the tree or ledge would be almost certain death.

The human creature began to move along the top of the fortress towards its rocky face above the river; he had heard the Baroness's answering cry, and had attained his object. He knew now where the nest must be; and peeping over the edge, he soon made it out in the still almost leafless oak. He surveyed his ground carefully and then vanished for an hour or two; and the Baron, who had not yet told his wife, felt a faint gleam of hope, which increased as the rain began to sweep down the lonely valley, hiding the fortress in swirls of mist, while now and then a cold blast rushed up from below, shaking the oak to its very roots.

But late in the afternoon, wrapped in a macintosh, and carrying a bag, the minister of evil again appeared upon the hill-top; and now the Baron gave full vent to his anger and distress, calling loudly to his wife. She left the

nest and joined him, wailing bitterly as she saw that ominous black figure standing but fifty feet above her treasures. Round and round they flew, anger and despair in their hearts.

Tom Lee had not been overtaken by his father's telegram; it was he who stood there, half sorry for the Kites, but with a youngster's love of climbing, and a keen desire to see the eggs. Now he fixed a short iron bar into the ground at the top of the cliff, and to this he fastened a stout rope. There would be just light enough to do the deed that day, and to-morrow he would travel home with the rent of one house and the spoil of another in his bag. Taking off his waterproof, and slinging on his shoulder a small basket full of cotton-wool, he seized the rope and let himself down it. As he hung in mid-air he thought he heard a call on the hill, and arriving safely on the ledge, he stood for a moment and listened. There it was again, not the Baron's angry cry, nor yet the Baroness's wail. But there was no time to lose, and with firm grasp of hand and foot he began to climb the oak. The boughs were sound and strong; all

that was needed was a nimble frame and a steady head, and of both these Tom had been possessed from his earliest boyhood. In three minutes the eggs were within his reach, and in another they were within the basket, safely covered up in the cotton-wool. At this moment the call caught his ear again, and ere he descended he paused to listen once more, and began to fear that some other human being was on that lonely hill. The Baron and the Baroness, who had been flying about him, though not daring to attack so formidable a foe, flew further and further away with heart-piercing cries as Tom descended the tree safely, gripped his rope again, and swarmed up it to the cliff-top.

No sooner was he safe and sound on terra firma, than a figure emerged from the drizzling mist and advanced towards him. Tom's heart quaked within him; was it the angry spirit of the mountains, or a constable come to carry out a new County Council order? But in another moment he saw that it was his father, wet through and with an excited glow in his eyes.

"Why, dad," he said, "I thought you were the Old Man of the Mountain. Was it you that called? Well, I'm blest,—you'll catch your death of cold!"

"I've been calling ever so long," said his father, out of breath. "I couldn't have found you but for the Kites. Didn't you get my telegram?"

"Not I," answered Tom; "we don't get telegrams up to time in these parts. But here's the rent all safe, dad." And he opened the basket.

The father looked with eager eyes at those beautiful eggs, and handled one gently with the deepest professional admiration.

"Well," he said, quietly, "now you've been down there once, you may as well go again. You just go and put 'em straight back, my lad."

Tom stared at his father, and thought the old man had gone clean daft. At that moment the Kites returned, and came wheeling overhead with loud melancholy cries.

"I've no time to explain, Tom; it's getting

dark, and there's not a moment to be lost. You do as I tell you, and put 'em straight back, all of them, as they were. We've got the rent."

At these last words, Tom seized the rope again, and in a minute was once more on the ledge below. His father watched him from the top, pretty confident in his son's powers of climbing. There was no need for anxiety: the good deed was done even quicker than the bad one; and Tom, puzzled but obedient, stood safe and sound once more by his father's side.

As they went back to the little inn down the valley in the drizzling rain, the story of the cheque was told; and nothing remained but to make sure that the Kites returned to their nest. Armed with a field-glass they climbed next day another hill, and lying there on the top, they watched the fortress long and anxiously. When they left the inn that afternoon on their homeward journey, the old dealer's heart was light. The Baron and the Baroness had not forsaken their treasures; and it may be that after all they will not be the last of their race.

Late that evening there arrived in London this telegram for the expectant collector from Stephen Lee:

"Your great kindness has saved two broods, mine and the Kites'."

DOWNS AND DUNGEONS

Two small cages hung side by side just above the open door of a dingy house in a dingy London street. It was a street in the region of Soho, gloomy and forlorn ; dirty bits of paper, fragments of old apples, treacherous pieces of orange-peel, lay sticking in its grimy mud, and a smutty drizzle was falling which could do no honest washing away of grime, but only make it stickier. It was not a cheerful place to live in, nor did the creatures living in it seem to rejoice in their life,—all except the Canary in one of the two cages, who sang a rattling, trilling, piercing song incessantly, with all the vigour of a London street-boy whistling in the dark mist of a November evening. Cats slunk about disconsolate ; carmen sat on their vans and smoked resignedly, with old sacks on

[*Face p.* 104.

DOWNS AND DUNGEONS.

their shoulders; women slipped sadly with draggled feet into the public-house and out again for such comfort as they could get there; but that Canary sang away as if it were living in a Paradise. The street rang with the shrill voice, and a cobbler in the shop opposite shook his fist at the bird and used bad language.

At last the Canary suddenly stopped singing, dropped to the floor of its cage, pecked up a few seeds, and drank water; then flew up again to its perch, and addressed the occupant of the other cage, a little insignificant-looking brown Linnet.

"What ever is the matter with you? Here you've been two nights and a day, and you don't say a word, nor sing a note! You don't even eat,—and of course you can't sing if you can't eat."

The Linnet opened its bill as if to speak, and shut it again with a gasp as of a dying bird.

"Come now," said the Canary, not unkindly, but with a certain comfortable Cockney patronising way, "you *must* eat and drink. We all eat and drink here, and get fat and happy, and

then we sing—Listen!" And from the neighbouring tavern there came a chorus of coarse voices.

"This is a jolly street," the Canary went on. "I was brought up in a dealer's shop in the East End, in very low society, in a gas-lit garret among dirty children. Here we can be out of doors in summer, and see a bit of blue overhead now and then; and in the winter I am warm inside, with plenty of seed and water, two perches in my cage, and both of them all to myself. It's a life of real luxury, and makes one sing. I could go on at it all day, trying to convince those miserable black Sparrows that they do not know what happiness means. But really it chills one's spirits a little to have another bird close by one who mopes and won't sing. Perhaps you can't? I have heard the dealer say that there are birds that can't: but I didn't believe it. One can't help one's self, —out it comes like a hemp-seed out of its shell."

The Canary rattled off again for full five minutes, and then said abruptly,

"Do you really mean you can't sing at all?"

"I used to sing on the Downs," said the Linnet at last, "but not like that."

"No, no," said the Canary; "that's not to be expected from such as you—one must have advantages, of course, to sing well. A natural gift, to begin with; and that only comes when you are well born. You see I come of a good stock of singers. My father sang at the Crystal Palace Show, and won a prize. I have heard the dealer say that we have a pedigree going up for generations, and of course we improve as we go on, because each of us gets the benefit of the education of all our ancestors. Just let me show you what birth and education can do." And he set off once more with such terrific energy that the cobbler over the way seized an unfinished boot, and looked as if he meant to hurl it at the cage.

Fortunately the Canary ceased at that moment, and turned again to the Linnet.

"You said you used to sing on the Downs. Pray, what are the Downs, and why can't you

sing here? With plenty to eat and nothing to do and a whole street of men and women to sing to, what more can you want? I fear you have a selfish and discontented disposition,—want of education, no doubt. But we must make allowance for every one, as Griggs the dealer used to say when he got in new birds that couldn't sing properly."

"I don't know why I can't sing here, the Linnet answered, rousing itself a little, "but I can't. You see we used to sing on the Downs as we flew about in the sun and the breeze and the sweet-scented air; and here I am shut up in foul air, with my wings tingling all day, and the song sticks in my throat. There was a little brook where we lived, that came out of the hill-side and sang gently all day and night as it ran down among the daisies and the gorse. We couldn't have gone on singing if it had had to stop running. We drank of it, and bathed in it, and listened to it; and then we danced away over the hills, singing, or perched on a gorse-spray, singing. And we knew what our singing meant; but I don't know what yours means. It's just a little

like the song of the Tree-pipit who lived at the foot of the Downs, but it's far louder."

"Naturally," said the Canary. "I have no acquaintance with Tree-pipits, but I presume they have not birth and education. But go on about the Downs; perhaps if you were to talk about them you might find your voice. I should like to hear you sing; I might give you some hints; and if we are to be neighbours, I should wish you to acquit yourself properly here—you really are not fit to be seen in such a street as this, but if you could sing our people might think better of you. Now go on, and when I want to sing I'll tell you to stop for a bit."

This was really very kind and condescending of the high-born Canary, and so the Linnet felt it: and sitting a little more upright on his perch, he began. "I was born on those Downs nearly three years ago. The first thing I can remember is the lining of our nest, which was so soft that I have never felt anything like it since, except the thistledown from which we used to get the seed when we were on our

rambles in the autumn. And the next thing I recollect is the prickles of the gorse-bush in which our nest was hidden, and the splendid yellow bloom, and the strong sweet scent it gave to the air. We were always being fed by our parents, but I needn't trouble you with that."

"No," said the Canary, "but I'm glad you were fed well, all the same: it's the main thing for song and satisfaction. Well, go on; this is all dreadfully provincial, but one must make allowance, as the dealer said."

"When we grew big enough we all five got up to the edge of the nest one by one, and our mother teased us to come out through the green prickles the same way that she came in and out to feed us. One by one we fluttered out, and perched on a bare hawthorn twig close by. Never shall I forget that moment! The world was all open to us,—a world of rolling green Downs, flecked here and there with yellow gorse like that of our home, and ending in a sparkling blue that I afterwards found was the sea. Skylarks were singing overhead: a Stonechat was perched on a gorse-twig close by,

balancing himself in the breeze,—a fine bird, with black head and russet breast. Swallows darted about catching the flies that haunted the gorse-bloom; and our own people, the Linnets, were dancing about in the air and twittering their song, or sitting bolt upright on the gorse over their nests, singing a few sweet notes as the fancy took them. We could tell them from all the others by the way they perched, and we tried to do it ourselves. I would show you myself how a Linnet perches when it's free, but I hardly have the strength, and I might knock my head against these wires."

"Don't trouble about it," said the Canary; "it's no doubt a vulgar pastime, which would not be appreciated in educated society. Go on; I'm not much bored yet—anything will do that will make you sing."

"I'll get on," said the Linnet; "but I have never felt such pain as in telling you of those happy times. We grew up, and in the later summer we joined a great gathering of our people from other Downs, and went down to the sea-side. There were thousands of us together,

and yet there was always food for us. Thistles, charlock, all sorts of tall plants grew there, on which we perched and hung, and pecked the delicious seeds. We could all twitter by that time, though we did not know how to sing properly; and the noise we made as we all rose together from a meal in the fresh sea air made all our hearts cheerful. And here, moving along the coast, and always finding food, we passed the winter. In the bitterest cold the seeds were always there; and at night we crept into hollows under shelter of the cliffs and slept soundly. Very few of us died, and those were nearly all old birds who were not strong enough to bear the force of the fierce winds that now and then swept along the coast and hurled the spray into the hollows where we roosted."

"Ah," said the Canary, "think what a privilege it is to be safe here in your own house, with food and water given you gratis, no rough winds, and a warm room in winter, that makes you sing, sing!" And off he went into one of his gay, meaningless songs, and the cobbler looked fierce and red in the face (he had been to the

public-house while the Linnet was talking), and laid his hand again upon a hob-nailed boot. But the Canary again stopped in time, and when the din ceased, the Linnet went on.

"When the days grew longer, and the sun gained strength, we broke up our great company. New thoughts and hopes broke in upon our hearts,—hopes that for me were never to be realised,—and a new beauty seemed to come upon all of us. My forehead and breast took a crimson hue, and my back became a beautiful chestnut; I know I was a handsome bird, for one little darling told me so, and said she would unite her lot with mine. With her I left the sea, and followed the Downs inland till we came to the place where I was born; and there, in a gorse-bush near our old home, we decided to build our nest. Do you know how to build a nest?"

"No," said the Canary. "We have those things done for us if we want them, while we sit and sing, in polite society. I can't imagine how you could stoop to do such work yourself, as you seem to have the making of good breeding in you. But we must make allowance!"

"Well, we did it," the Linnet continued, "and I never enjoyed anything so much. My darling and I had a great stir in our hearts, you see, and we could not stop to think whether it was genteel or not. There was stir and force and great love in our hearts, which taught us how to do it, and carried us through the work. And then the eggs were laid,—six of them; I knew them all from each other, and every one of the spots on each of them. While she sat on them, steadily, faithfully, wearing away her best feathers with the duty, I danced in the air, and brought her food, and sang my love to her from the twigs of the gorse; for I loved her, how I loved her! My heart went out to her in song, and she knew every note I sang."

"Then sing now," said the Canary. "Show me how you did it, and we shall get on better."

"I can't, I can't," said the Linnet, "and I am going to tell you why. One day I was looking for food for my sitting mate, when I saw another cock Linnet on the ground, hopping about and picking up seed. How the seed came to be there I did not stay to ask, nor notice anything

unusual about the manner of the bird; it was high time that my wife should be fed. The traitor called me to share the seed; it was our well-known call, and I answered it as I flew down. For a moment I noticed nothing, and was about to fly off when I saw that that bird had a string round his leg, which came from behind a little thorn-bush in front of the hedge close by. I started, suspicious, and at that same moment down came on the top of me a heavy net, half stunning me, and a man came from behind the bush and seized me. I struggled, but it was no use. With a grimy hand he held me fast and put me into a cage like this, and in a cage I have existed ever since, without hope or liberty or the power to sing as I used to."

"What became of your mate and the eggs?" asked the Canary, interested for the first time in his life in some one besides himself.

"How should I know?" answered the Linnet. "She could not well feed herself and hatch the eggs. I don't wish to think about it, for she is lost to me, and the Downs are lost to me, and all is lost to me that made life worth

living. The bitterness of that first moment in the cage I won't and can't describe to you. If you were turned out of your cage into the street to keep company with the Sparrows, you might feel a little, a very little, like it. At first it was furious anger that seized me, then utter blank stupefying despair.

"The man flung something over the cage, and I was in darkness. I suppose he went on with his wicked work, for after a while the cage door was opened, and another Linnet was put in, struggling and furious: and this happened several times. Each time the door was opened I made a frantic effort to get out, and the others too, and the little cage was full of loose feathers and struggling birds. One of us did get away, with the loss of his tail, and most gladly would I have given my tail for liberty and one more sight of my mate and the eggs.

"At last the cage was taken up: we all fluttered and scrambled over each other, thinking something better was going to happen now. But nothing happened for a long time,

and then nothing but misery. Half dead with jolting, shaking, and swaying, we found ourselves at last in a small close room, where we were taken out and examined one by one, and put into separate small cages, so small that we could hardly turn round in them. The room was full of these cages, and there was a continual noise of hysterical fluttering and sorrowful twittering. None of us cared to talk, and there was nothing but misery to talk about. Seed and water were given us, and we ate and drank a little after a while, but there was no delight in that lukewarm water and that stale seed.

"But I had better stop: I'm sure you want to sing again. And there is nothing more to tell; one by one my fellow-captives were taken away, and I suppose what happened to me happened to them too. Caged we all are, and expected to sing, and to forget the Downs and the gorse and the brook and the fresh air! But we don't and we can't,—it is the little life left within us, to hope against hope for the Downs again."

"Don't you think it may be all a dream?" said the Canary, kindly; "are you sure there are such things as you talk of? You can't see the Downs from here, can you? Then how do you know there are such things? It's all a dream, I tell you: I had such a dream once, of rocky hills and curious trees, and fierce sun, and a vast expanse of blue waves, and all sorts of strange things that I have heard men talk of; but it was only because my grandmother had been telling us of the old island home of our family, that belongs to us by right if we could only get there. I never was there myself, you see, yet I dreamed of it, and you have been dreaming of the Downs, which no doubt belong to your family by right."

"I can't see the Downs," said the Linnet, "but I can feel them still, and I know that my feeling is true."

After this there was silence for a few minutes. Suddenly the Canary burst into song, as if to drive away the Linnet's sad thoughts. And so indeed he meant it, and also to ease

his own mind, after it had been bottled up so long. Little did he know what was to come of that outburst, as he poured forth rattle and reel, reel and rattle, every feather quivering, the cage vibrating, the air resounding, the street echoing! Children playing in the gutter stopped to look up at the cages, at the triumphant yellow bird in all the glow of effort, and at the ugly brown one that seemed trying to hide away from this hurricane of song. Even the costermonger's placid donkey in the cart two doors away shook its long ears and rattled its harness. A policeman at the end of the street turned his head slowly round to listen, but recollected himself and turned it slowly back again. The red-faced cobbler, who had been more than once to the drink-shop while the birds were talking, once more seized the hob-nailed boot he was mending, and as the Canary burst afresh, and after a second's pause, into a still shriller outpouring, he glanced out of the open window up the street, saw the policeman's back vanishing round the corner, and then took

wicked aim and flung the boot with all his force at the unconscious singer.

The song suddenly ceased; there was the crash of wood and wirework tumbling to the ground, and the gutter children scrambled up and made for the fallen cage. The cobbler rushed out of the opposite house, snatched up the boot and vanished. A woman with dishevelled hair came tearing into the street and picked up the cage. It was empty, and the door was open. She glanced up, and with a sigh of relief saw the Canary still safe in his cage.

The cobbler's arm had swerved ever so little, and the boot had hit the wrong cage. The door had come open as it reached the ground, and the Linnet had escaped. The woman thanked her stars that it was "the ugly bird" that was gone, and so too did the cobbler, now repentant, as he peered from behind the door of his back-kitchen. The Canary sat still and frightened on his perch, and for a full hour neither sang a note nor pecked a seed.

When the cage fell and the door had come unlatched, the Linnet was out of it in a moment, but, dizzy and bruised with the fall, and feeling his wings stiff and feeble, he looked for something to rest on. The first object that met his eyes was the donkey in the coster's cart,—and indeed there was nothing else in the street that looked the least bit comfortable. Donkeys had been familiar to Lintie on the Downs, and among the thistles they both loved. So he perched on the donkey's back, his claws convulsively grasping the tough grey hair.

The sharp eyes of a small muddy boy in the gutter instantly caught sight of him, and with a shrill yell he seized an old tin sardine-box with which he had been scraping up the mud for a pie, and aimed it at the bird. But that yell saved Lintie; the donkey shook his ears as it pierced their hairy recesses, and the bird at the same instance relaxed his hold of the hair and flew up above the house-roofs.

The air up there was even worse than down in the street. It was still drizzling, and the fine rain, clogged with the smoke from countless

crooked chimney-pots, seemed to thicken and congeal upon every object that it met. It clung to the Linnet's feathers, it made his eyes smart, and his heart palpitate fiercely; he must rest again somewhere, and then try his wings once more.

Fluttering over those horrible chimney-pots, he spied at last a roof where there was an attempt at a little garden: a box of sallow-looking mignonette, and two or three pots of old scarlet geraniums. Lintie dropped upon the mignonette, which refreshed him even with its sickly sweetness, and for a moment was almost happy. But only for a moment; suddenly, from behind one of the geranium-pots there came a swift soft rush of grey fur, a lightning-stroke of a velvet paw, a struggle in the mignonette, and Lintie emerged with the loss of three white-edged tail-feathers, while a pair of angry yellow eyes followed his scared flight into the grimy air.

The very fright seemed to give his wings a sudden convulsive power. Where they were carrying him he could not tell, and the loss of

three of his steering feathers mattered little. Over the crooked chimneys, over dismal streets and foul back-yards he flew, till the air seemed to clear a little as a large open space came in sight. There were tall fine houses round this space, but all the middle part of it was full of trees and shrubs, and even flower-beds. The stems of the trees were dead-black with smoke, and the shrubs looked heavy and sodden; but yet this was the best thing that Lintie had seen for many long and weary days. Even the sounds as well as sights revived him, for surely, heard through the roar of the great street hard by, there came the cooing of Woodpigeons,—the very same soothing sound that used to come up to the Downs from the beech-woods, that hung on their steep sides.

He flew down into one of the thick shrubs, found a way in, and hid himself. He seemed as secure as in his native gorse-bush; and as it was dark in there and he was tired, and evening was not far distant, he put his head under his wing and went to sleep.

He had not slept very long when he was waked

up by a sparrow coming into the bush and beginning to chatter loudly. The next minute there came another, then a third, a fourth, half-a-dozen together, all chattering and quarrelling so noisily that for the moment they did not notice the stranger. But more and more came bustling in, and the din and the hubbub were so overwhelming that Lintie felt he must go at all risks. He moved, was detected, and instantly pounced upon.

"Who are you? What's your name? What are you doing in our roosting-bush? What do you want here? No vulgar vagrants here! Take that, and that, and that!"

So they all shouted in chorus, pecking at him the while, and the noise was so unusual that two young men of the law, looking out of a first-floor window in Lincoln's Inn Fields, took their pipes out of their mouths and listened.

"It's all over with me at last," thought Lintie; but he made one brave effort to escape, found his way out of the bush, and flew into the open roadway, pursued by half a hundred sparrows.

"What in the world is up?" said one of the

men up in the window. "By George, it's murder they're at," he cried, as he saw a whirling, screaming cloud of sparrows on the ground below him, and their victim resigning himself to inevitable death. In a moment his pipe was on the floor, and he himself was in the street. The sparrows flew away swearing; Lintie crouched on the ground, a heap of dishevelled feathers.

The student took him gently in his hand and carried him into the house.

"They'd all but done for him, the beggars," he said to his friend. "I fancy he might come round if we only knew what to do with him. I say, I wish you'd see whether M—— has gone home; it's only just round in New Square,—you know the staircase. He'll like to see the bird anyhow, and he can doctor it if he thinks it worth while."

The friend went out, grumbling but compliant, and in five minutes returned with the Ornithologist, keen-faced and serious. He took the bird in his hand.

"It's only a damaged cock linnet," he said at once and decisively: "an escaped one, of course,

for his crimson has turned a dirty yellow, you see, as it always does in confinement. I think he may live if he's cared for. If he does, I'll take him on my cycle into Sussex on Saturday, and I'll let him go there. Can you find a cage?"

An old cage was found somewhere, and Lintie was a prisoner once more; but he was past caring about that, and simply sat huddled up at the bottom of it with his head under his wing. The Ornithologist called a cab,—a very unusual step for him,—put his great-coat over the cage, and drove off to the West End.

Two days later the Ornithologist was wheeling swiftly southwards, with a little cage fixed to the saddle in front of him. The motion was not unpleasant to Lintie when once they were free of streets and crowds, and out of suburbs, even to the last new house of dreary Croydon. He was in a cage still; but birds, even more than other animals, have a subtle inward sense of sympathy that tells them surely in whose hands they are. Lintie was in the strong hands of one who loves all birds, and whose happiness is bound up in theirs.

When they came to the North Downs between Croydon and Reigate, he stopped and looked about him. The fringe of London still seemed there; he saw villas building, men playing golf, advertisements in the fields. "Better go on," he said to himself; "this is too near London for a damaged linnet." And they slipped rapidly down into a verdant vale of wood and pasture.

At last they began to mount again. The Ornithologist had avoided the main route, and was ascending the South Downs at a point little known to Londoners. Near the top the hollow road began to be fringed by the burning yellow of the gorse-bloom; the air grew lighter, and the scent of clean, sweet herbage put new life into man and bird. The Linnet fluttered in his cage with wild uncertain hopes; but that determined Ornithologist went on wheeling his machine up the hill.

In a few minutes they came out of the hollow road on to the bare summit of the Down. It was an April day; the drizzle had given way to bright sunshine and a bracing east wind. Far

off to the south they could see the glitter of the sea fretted into a million little dancing waves. Nearer at hand were the long sweeping curves of chalk down, the most beautiful of all British hills, for those who know and love them ; with here and there a red-tiled farmhouse lurking in a cool recess, or a little watercourse springing from the point where down and cultivation meet, and marking its onward course by the bushes and withy-beds beside it.

A Wheatear, newly arrived in the glory of slaty-blue plumage, stood bowing at them on a big stone hard by. A Stonechat, on the top twig of a gorse-bush, bade a sturdy defiance to all bird-catchers. The Cuckoo could be faintly heard from the vale behind them ; still the Ornithologist held his hand.

Suddenly there came dancing overhead, here, there, and everywhere, gone in a moment and back again, half a dozen little twittering fairies ; and then one of them, alighting no one knows how or when, sat bolt upright on a gorse-bush, and turned a crimson breast and forehead towards the Ornithologist. His hand was already on the

cage-door; in a moment it was open, and Lintie was gone.

I cannot tell you whether those linnets were his own friends and relations; but I think that, thanks to the Ornithologist's true instinct, he was not far from his old home. And as the summer was all before him, and the hearts of linnets are kind, and Nature in sweet air repairs all damage quickly, I cannot doubt that his sky soon cleared, and that the heavy London thundercloud rolled far away out of his horizon.

DOCTOR AND MRS. JACKSON

Doctor and Mrs. Jackson were, for all we knew, the oldest pair in the parish: their heads were very grey, and they had an old-world look about them, and an air of wisdom and experience in life, that gave them a place of importance in our society and claimed the respect of us all. Yet I cannot remember that any of us noticed them until they became the intimate friends of the old Scholar. Then we all came to know them, and to feel as though we had known them all our lives.

Their heads were grey, and their dress was black, and as they lived in the old grey tower of the church they seemed to have something ancient and ecclesiastical about them; no one inquired into their history or descent; we took it all for

[*Face p.* 131.

Doctor and Mrs. Jackson.

granted, as we did the Established Church itself. They were there as the church was there, looking out over meadows and ploughed fields as it had looked out since good souls built it in the reign of Henry III., and over these same fields Dr. and Mrs. Jackson looked out with knowing eyes as they sat on their gurgoyles of a sunshiny morning. The water that collected on the tower roof was discharged by large projecting gurgoyles ending in the semblance of two fierce animal heads, one a griffin, and the other a wolf; and on these the Doctor and his wife loved to sit and talk, full in view of the old Scholar's study room.

The church was not only old, but mouldy and ill cared for. It had escaped the ruthless hand of the restorer, the ivy clung around it, the lights and shadows still made its quaint stone fretwork restful to the eye, but I fear it cannot be denied that it needed the kindly hand of a skilful architect to keep it from decay. Half of a stringcourse below the gurgoyles had fallen and never been replaced: and below that again the effigy of the patron saint looked as if it had been damaged by

stone-throwing. The churchyard was overgrown and untidy, and the porch unswept, and the old oaken doors were crazy on their hinges. Inside you saw ancient and beautiful woodwork crumbling away, old tiles cracking under the wear and tear of iron-heeled boots and old dames' pattens, and cobwebs and spiders descending from the groined roof upon your prayer-book. If you went up the spiral staircase into the ringers' chamber, you would see names written on the wall, two or three empty bottles, and traces of banquets enjoyed after the clock had struck and the peal ceased,—banquets of which the Doctor and his wife occasionally partook, coming in through that unglazed lancet window when all was still.

The church indeed was mouldy enough, and the air within it was close and sleep-giving: and as the old parson murmured his sermon twice a Sunday from the high old pulpit, his hearers gradually dropped into a tranquil doze or a pleasant day-dream,—all except the old Scholar, who sat just below, holding his hand to his ear, and eagerly looking for one of those subtle

allusions, those reminiscences of old reading, or even now and then three words of Latin from Virgil or the "Imitatio," with which his lifelong friend would strain a point to please him. They had been at school together, and at college together, and now they were spending their last years together, for the old Scholar had come, none of us knew whence, and settled down in the manor-house by the churchyard, hard by the Rectory of his old companion. And so they walked together through the still and shady avenues of life's evening, wishing for no change, reading much and talking little, lovers of old times and old books, seeking the truth, not indeed in the world around them, but in the choice words of the wise man of old: "Pia et humilis inquisitio veritatis, per sanas patrum sententias studens ambulare."

And Dr. and Mrs. Jackson looked down on them from their gurgoyles, and approved. I suppose that old grey-headed bird did not know that he had been honoured with a doctorate, though he looked wise enough to be doctor of divinity, law and medicine, all in one; it had

been conferred upon him by the old Scholar one day as he walked up and down his garden path, glancing now and then at the friendly pair on the tower. And in one way or another we had all come to know of it; and even visitors to the village soon made acquaintance with the Doctor and his wife.

No one, as I said, unless it were his old friend the Vicar, knew whence or why the old Scholar had come to take up his abode among us. We thought he must have had some great sorrow in his life which was still a burden to him: but if it was the old old story, he never told his love. Yet the burden he carried, if there were one, did not make him a less cheerful neighbour to the folk around him. He knew all the old people in the village, if not all the young ones: he would sit chatting in their cottages on a wet day, and on a fine one he would stroll around with some old fellow past his work, and glean old words and sayings, and pick up odds and ends of treasure for the history of the parish which he was going to write some day.

"I am like Dr. and Mrs. Jackson," he would

say: "I poke and pry into all the corners of the old place, and when I find anything that catches my eye I carry it home and hide it away. And really I don't know that my treasures will ever come to light, any more than the Doctor's up there in the tower."

Those who were ever admitted to his study, as I sometimes was in my college vacations, knew that there was great store of hidden treasure there; and now and again he would talk to me of the church and its monuments, of the manor and its copyholds, of furlongs and virgates and courts leet and courts baron, and many other things for which I cared little, though I listened to please him, and left him well pleased myself.

But at other times, and chiefly on those dim still days of autumn when a mist is apt to hang over men's hearts as over field and woodland, he would walk up and down his garden path 'talking to hisself in furrin tongues' as our old sexton expressed it, who heard him as he dug a grave in the adjoining churchyard. Once or twice I heard him myself, when I happened to be within range of his gentle voice. Sometimes it was

Greek, and then I could not easily follow it. Once I heard "Sed neque Medorum silvæ," and could just catch sight of him pausing to look round at the grey fields as he slowly added line to line of that immortal song. And there were single lines which he would repeat again and again, cherishing them with tenderness like old jewels, and doubtless seeing many a sparkle in them that I could not, as he turned them over and over. And there were bits of Latin from some author unknown to me then, known to me later as the unknown author of the "De Imitatione": "Unde coronabitur patientia tua, si nihil adversi occurrerit;" or, "Nimis avide consolationem quæris."

At one time he took long walks or rides, and coming in after dark to dinner, would spend the evening in "logging" (as he called it) all that he had seen or heard. But when I knew him he was getting old, and the rambles were growing shorter: it was not often that he was seen beyond the village. He would go up to the village shop of afternoons, where a chair was always set for him, and talk to the people as they

came in on various errands. But his old friends died off one by one: he followed them to the churchyard, and would stand with bare head there, listening to the Vicar reading the prayers, while Dr. and Mrs. Jackson looked down on the scene from the tower as usual. And really it seemed as if they would soon be the only old friends left to him.

For the greater part of the year they were his companions most of the day: they became a part of his life, and we called them his familiar spirits. When he woke in the morning he could see them as he lay in bed, and sometimes they would come to his window if he had put out a breakfast for them overnight. But as a rule they took their own breakfast in the fields with the rooks and starlings and peewits, while he was dressing; and when, after his own breakfast, he took his walk up and down the garden path, they were to be seen perched on their gurgoyles, preening their feathers, chatting, and turning their wise old heads round and round in great ease of body and contentment of mind. In the early spring, after a bath in the large flat earthenware pan, which

was daily filled for them by the housekeeper, they would turn their attention to a heap of odds and ends laid out for them in a corner of the garden: bits of string, old shoe-laces, shreds of all sorts,—everything that was wanted for nothing else went into the Doctor's "library," as the old Scholar called it, in which he and his wife conducted their researches. Nor could our dear old friend always refrain from adding some special treasure to the heap: he is known to have cut off one button after another from his coat, because they had a gleam upon them that he thought would please, and fragments of his old neckties were found in the tower when the long companionship had at last come to an end. It was only after the nesting season that for a time he missed them, when they took their young family out into the world, and introduced them to the society of which we may hope they have since become ornaments; and this absence the old Scholar took in very good part, being confident that he should see them again in August at latest. Besides, at the end of June I myself came home to the village: and though I could not hope to rival

them in his esteem or respect, I might make shift to fill the gap till they returned. When I went to see him he would take my hand with all kindness, and invariably point to the vacant church tower. "I am glad to see you, my lad: Dr. and Mrs. Jackson have gone for a few days into the country with the children, but they will be home again long before you leave us."

It is sad to me even now to think that such an old friendship, which I am sure was felt in equal strength by both men and birds, should ever have come to an end. It had to be, but it gives me pain to tell the story.

The old Vicar fell into a drowsy decay, and the murmur of his sermons was heard no more in the church. A Curate took the work for him, and the old Scholar came and listened as before; but the sweet old memories of a long friendship were not to be found in those discourses, nor the flashes of light from the world's great poets and thinkers that had been wont to keep him awake and cheer him. And at last the old shepherd died, and slept among the sheep to whose needs

he had been ministering so quietly for half a century. The old Scholar, bent and withered, was there to see the last of his friend, and the Doctor and his wife looked sadly down from the tower. They never saw him again outside his own garden.

A new Vicar came, a kindly, shrewd, and active man, whose sense of the right order of things was sadly wounded as he examined the church from end to end in company with his churchwardens. "You have let the fabric fall into ruin, Mr. Harding," he said, "into ruin: I can't use a milder word. We must scrape together what we can, and make it fit for divine worship. Let us come up into the tower and see how things are there."

The crestfallen churchwardens followed him up the well-worn stairs, but were left far behind, and his active youthful figure disappeared in front of them into the darkness. When they found him at last in the ringers' chamber, he was kicking at a great heap of refuse accumulated on the floor in a corner.

"What on earth is this, Mr. Harding?" asked

the Vicar. "Who makes a kitchen-midden of the church tower?"

"That there belongs to Dr. and Mrs. Jackson," said poor Harding.

"Then Dr. and Mrs. Jackson had better come and fetch it away at once!" cried the Vicar, forgetting in his indignation to ask who they were. "See about it directly, please: it is your duty as churchwarden, and if your duties have so far been neglected, you cannot do better than begin to make up for the past. I do not mean to speak harshly," he added, seeing Mr. Harding's grave face grow graver, "but the state of this tower is dreadful, and we must see to it at once."

Mr. Harding said nothing, but made for the staircase, disappeared from view, and went home very sad at heart. "I doubt the old Doctor and his missus will have to go," said he. Mrs. Harding let her work drop to the floor and stared at him. "Then the old gentleman 'll have to go too," she said. And there was consternation among all the old folks that evening.

Next day I happened to be sitting with the

old Scholar when the new Vicar called. He was received with all the gentle grace and cordiality which our old friend showed to strangers, and we sat for a few minutes talking of the weather and the village. Then the Vicar came to the point of his mission, and I am bound to say that he performed his operation with tenderness and skill, considering how little he could have guessed what pain he was inflicting.

"You love the old church, I am sure," he began. "And I daresay you like it better as it is, and would not care to see it restored. I don't want to spoil it, but I must at least begin by cleaning it thoroughly: and even that alone will cost a good deal. It is inches deep in dust and mess in places, and up in the tower they eat and drink and smoke and write their names,—and what they do it for I don't know, but they have made it the common rubbish-heap of the parish. By the way, can you tell me anything of a Dr. and Mrs. Jackson, who seem to have goings on up there, — some eccentric old people are they? or——" At this point he caught sight of my face, which was getting as red as fire.

"Dear me," he said, turning suddenly upon me, and losing his balance as he saw that something was wrong, "I hope they are not—not—" and he stopped in some perplexity.

"No, Sir," said I. "My name is Johnson." And I broke out into an irresistible peal of laughter, in which even the old Scholar joined me,—but it was the last time I ever saw him laugh.

We cleared up the mystery for the discomfited Vicar; and the old Scholar went quietly to his desk and wrote a cheque with a trembling hand.

"I will give you fifty pounds," he said, "to help to put the old church in good repair, and I will trust you not to 'restore' it. We have neglected it too long. Dr. and Mrs. Jackson must take their treasures elsewhere: but I trust that they will long remain your parishioners." And so they parted, each with a pleasing sense of duty done: but the Vicar had high hopes before him, while our dear old Scholar began to nurse sad misgivings. I cheered him up and bade him goodbye, and meant to tell the Vicar all about him. But one thing and another

prevented me, and the next day I left the village.

This happened at the end of June, and it was September before I was home again from the Continent. The man who drove me from the station told me that the old Scholar was dying. I went to his gate through the churchyard, and found it neat and well-trimmed: the church was looking brighter and tidier, and the door was open; and the tower seemed to have found a fresh youth, with its stringcourse and effigy repaired, and its abundant crop of ivy lopped away from the lancet windows. But no Doctor or his wife were sitting on the gurgoyles, or taking the air on the battlements. I knocked sadly at the old Scholar's door, fearing that he had spent his last days in utter friendlessness.

His old housekeeper let me in, and took me at once upstairs. He was lying on his bed, facing an open window that looked towards the tower; there was another to the right with a view of distant cornfields full of autumn sheaves. For once, she told me, that he looked at the cornfields, he looked a dozen times at the tower:

"and if the Doctor and his wife would but come back," she said, "he would surely die happy. They should be here by now, if 'twere like it was in the old times: but they went off without their young ones when the men began to rummage in the tower, and I doubt they'll never come back again now.

The old Scholar was only half conscious, but he seemed to know me and kept my hand in his. I made up my mind not to leave him, and sat there till the shadow of the tower grew long enough to reach us, and then till the great harvest moon arose over the distant corn-sheaves. Sometimes he would murmur a few words, and once or twice I caught the favourite old treasures,—"Unde coronabitur patientia tua," and "Nimis avide consolationem quæris." And so we passed the night, till the moon sank again, and 'the high lawns appeared, Under the opening eyelids of the Morn.'

Then I left him for a few minutes, and descending to the garden filled the earthenware pan with fresh water, and scattered food on the dewy grass in the dim hope that the Doctor and

his wife might have come back to see the last of their old friend.

And I had no sooner returned and drawn up the blinds of the sick-room than I saw them once more on the gurgoyles. I could hardly believe my eyes: I threw up the window and let the sweet air into the room. The light roused the old Scholar; he opened his eyes, and at that moment the Doctor and his wife flew past the window to their morning bath. I am sure he saw them; a smile of great happiness came over his wasted features, and he lay back and closed his eyes again. I read him the Lord's Prayer: and after a while I heard him whisper, "Nunc coronabitur—," as he sank into sleep.

Each day, until he was laid by his old friend the Vicar, we put out the morning bath and breakfast for his last old friends; then the house was shut up, and finding that they were not expected, the Doctor and his wife departed, and were seen no more by any of us. They had done their kindly work well, and they took our thanks with them.

A LUCKY MAGPIE

"So you've kept old Mag safe all this time," I called out, as I came through the little croft under the apple-trees, and caught sight of the farmer sitting at his door and smoking his evening pipe; and not forgetting my duty as became a midshipman in Her Majesty's Service, I took off my cap and made three bows to the magpie, whose wicker cage was hanging just over the farmer's head.

Farmer Reynardson and his magpie and I had always been great friends. Ever since I was a little fellow I had had a great liking for the farmer's friendly face, and a still greater reverence for his bird, for he never would let me come within sight of it without making my obeisance in due form.

"It's a lucky magpie," he always said, "and

I don't know what mightn't happen if you didn't treat him with proper respect. Honour where honour is due, my boy!"

So I always made my three bows, which seemed to please both the bird and his master. I say "master" now, but in those days I never thought of him as the magpie's master, nor of the bird as his property. I considered Mag as a member of the family, about whom there was something rather mysterious. It was only when I grew older that I began to think of asking questions about him, and it was not till the very last evening before I left to join the training-ship that I ventured to ask the history of my revered friend. But the farmer would not tell me then. "When you're ready to fight for the Queen, then I'll tell you the story," he said.

So I had to wait a pretty long time; and whenever I came home from the *Britannia* and called at Slade Croft, I felt my curiosity increasing. The story must be worth hearing, or I should not have been kept waiting for it so long. And when I was gazetted midshipman,

A Lucky Magpie.

[*Face p.* 148.

and ran home to my grandfather's for a week before joining my ship, I slipped off to the farm the very first evening after dinner.

Farmer Reynardson rose, shook hands warmly, and slapped me on the back. Then he turned me round and inspected my jacket and Her Majesty's buttons carefully.

"Now for the story," I cried. "It's all right, you needn't look at my boots too, you know," as his eye travelled down my uniform trousers. "Now for the yarn of the lucky magpie."

"George," said the farmer gravely, putting his hand on my shoulder, "you shall have it, my lad, this very evening. But I must show you something first." He walked me through the orchard to a shady corner by the hedge, and showed me a little stone set upright in the ground, on which I read this inscription—

Here lies the body of
a lucky Magpie
and an
attached
Friend. (J. R.)

"It's a new one, he in the cage," he said,

quite sadly. "Neither I nor the missis could get along without one. Old Mag died quite easy, of nothing but old age, and old he was, to be sure. He'd have died years ago, if he'd been any one else's bird. He'd have been shot years ago if he'd lived his own natural life. They say it's cruel keeping birds in cages; but if ever a bird was happy, that one was. And what's more," he said, with a touch of pathos in his voice which I have often remembered since then, when I have been telling his story to others, "he had his share in making others happy, and that's more than can be said for some of us, my boy. However, come along, and I'll spin you the yarn (as you seafaring folks say); and, indeed, I'll be glad to tell it to some one, for poor old Mag's sake. Honour where honour is due."

We sat down on the bench by the front door, and Mrs. Reynardson, bonny and bright-eyed, came and gave me her hand and sat down with us. The farmer paused a bit to collect his thoughts, while he pensively tickled the newly-installed genius of the house with the

sealing-waxed end of his long pipe. The genius seemed not unworthy of his venerable predecessor, for he showed no resentment, and settled himself down comfortably to hear the tale—or to roost.

"Now then. Once upon a time," said I, to jog his memory.

But that dear old fellow never did things quite like other people; perhaps that was why I was so fond of him. He withdrew his pipe-stem from the cage, and patting the back of his wife's hand with it in passing (an action I did not then understand), he pointed it in the direction of the hills which bounded our view.

"If you were to go up there," he said, "just where you see the gap in the long line of trees, you would see below you, on the other side, a small village, and on beyond the village you'd see a bit of a hillock, with three big elms on it. And if you got near enough, I'll be bound you'd see a magpie's nest in the tallest tree to the right. There always was one, when I was a boy there, and there has always been one whenever I've happened to be over there

since; and it was in that nest that my old Mag was born, and I was born within sight of it.

"Of course, we knew of it, we boys of the village, and we'd have been up there often, only that tree was a bad one to climb, as the magpie knew very well. Easy work when you got to the branches, but, unlike most elms, this one had fifteen feet of big broad stem before you reached them. None of us could get up that fifteen feet, though the bark was rough and we could get some hold with fingers and toes; sooner or later we were sure to come slipping down, and it was lucky for us that the grass was long and soft below.

"Well, when it's a matter of fingers and toes, a girl is as good as a boy, if she has some strength and pluck, and it was a girl that showed me how to climb that tree. Nelly Green was her name; we were fast friends, she and I, and it was between us two that the solemn treaty and alliance—as the newspapers say—was concluded, by which we were to get possession of a young magpie. First it was agreed that when we had got our bird (we began at the wrong end, you

see), I was to keep it, because Nelly's mother would have no pets in the house. Secondly, she was to go no higher than the first branch, because girls were not fit to go worming themselves up to the tops of trees in petticoats. And then—let me see—she was to climb the bark first, because of her small hands and feet, and was to carry a rope round her waist, which she was to tie to a branch to help me in coming up after her. Fourthly, we were only to take one nestling, and to leave the others in peace.

"Nelly said that this treaty was to be written out and signed with hedgehog's blood. Where she got the notion from I can't tell, but no hedgehog turned up in time, and we were neither of us too fond of writing, so we let that plan drop."

"What a dreadful tomboy she must have been, John!" said Mrs. Reynardson.

"Well, I won't say she wasn't a bit of one," said the farmer, with a twinkle in his eye; "but she turned out none so badly—none so badly, as you shall hear, my dear."

"We knew very well, of course, how the magpies were getting on, and when the eggs were hatched; and a few days after that, we got our rope and reached the hillock by a roundabout way, not to attract notice. Nelly had been studying the bark of that tree for many a day, though I never would let her go up lest she should come to grief coming down again. Up she went just like a creep-mouse, got a good seat on the branch and tied the rope round it. Then up I went too, hand over hand, and in five minutes more I was at the nest; a huge bit of building it was, roofed all over with sticks. The old birds flew round screaming, but I put one young bird in my pocket, and came down safely to where Nelly was sitting. Then the bird was put into *her* pocket, and she let herself down by the rope; and lastly I untied the rope (for it would never have done to have left it there), and wondered how *I* was to come down.

"At last I resolved on climbing out on my stomach to the very end of the branch, where I could bear it down with my weight, and then dropping. But my weight was too little to pull

the big branch down far, and as I came to the ground, I sprained my ankle badly.

"However, there was the bird all safe, and that was the great thing. Nelly helped me home, and Mag was put into a wicker cage we had ready for him. Of course we got scolded, but I was in too great pain to mind, and Nelly was used to it from her mother, so we got off pretty well.

"Of course, too, I couldn't go to school, and Mag was my companion all day long. He had a tremendous appetite, and it was as much as I could do to find food for him. If I let him out of his cage he would follow me about, opening his bill and crying for food; and at night he slept outside my bedroom window. I had never had a pet before, and I got to love that bird better than anything in the world, except Nelly; and, indeed, I'm not sure that Nelly was not a bit jealous of him those few weeks."

"*I* should have been," said Mrs. Reynardson.

"Of course you would, my dear," said her husband. "Men were deceivers ever, as they

say; and boys too. But Mag was to be Nelly's property as much as mine, by that treaty of alliance, for ever and ever; and that treaty was *never* broken. But I must go on.

"When my ankle was getting well, there came a neat maidservant to the cottage one day, and said that Miss Pringle wished to see me at six o'clock precisely; and wondering what she could want with me, I made myself uncomfortable in my best clothes and limped up the village to her back door. I was shown into a very neat parlour, where Miss Pringle sat in a stiff chair knitting.

"She was the old maid of our village, and when I've told you that, you know a good bit about her. She was a tightish sort of an old maid—tight in the lips, and tight in her dress, and tight, so they said, in her purse-strings too; but you shall form your own opinion of that presently. She had neat curls on each side of her head, and a neat thin nose, rather large, and she sat a bit forward and looked at you as if she'd found a speck of dirt on you somewhere. I always felt as if I had a smut

on my nose when Miss Pringle was speaking to me.

"'Come in, John Reynardson, says she. 'You may stand on that bit of matting by the door. What is the matter with your foot?'

"'Sprained my ankle, ma'am, climbing a tree with Nelly Green.'

"'With Nelly Green?' says Miss Pringle. 'Then Nelly Green ought to be ashamed of herself! Boys may be monkeys if they like, but not girls. Tell Nelly Green I'm ashamed of her!'"

"Did she say that?" asked Mrs. Reynardson.

"She did, and she never liked Nelly Green too much after that. She asked me several times afterwards if that monkey-girl was ashamed of herself." Here the farmer stopped a minute to laugh. "And I always told her she wasn't. No more she was—not a bit!

"Well, she told me frankly that she didn't like boys—and that was very kind of her!—but I could have told her so myself as soon as ever I was put on the matting and had my face looked at for smuts. Miss Pringle was not one of

that soft kind of single ladies who think all boys angels—not she! But, bless her old soul! the Jackdaw, as Nelly and I used to call her, because of her grey head and her black dress and her pecking way—the Jackdaw was nearly as lucky a bird for me as the magpie—in the long run, that is.

"She told me she wanted a boy to look after her pony and carriage, and as I was recommended by the Vicar, and was strong and active, she would offer me the place. But I wasn't to climb trees, and I wasn't to spin halfpence, and I wasn't to do this, and I wasn't to do that, and lastly, I wasn't to keep animals about the house. 'Mind,' she said, shaking her nose and her forefinger at the same time, 'I allow no pet animals about this house, so if you take my offer you must give up your rabbits.'

"'Yes, ma'am,' says I, though I hadn't any; but her nose was so tight when she said that, that I knew I had better hold my tongue.

"Then she took me through her garden, making me pull up some weeds by the way, and lay them neatly in a heap in a corner,

with a spadeful of ashes on them to keep the seeds from flying; and so to her little stable, where she showed me the pony and harness, and a little whitewashed room upstairs where I was to sleep. It was as neat as herself, and over the bed was a large piece of cardboard with three words on it—'Tidiness, Punctuality, Obedience.' Very good words for a lad just beginning to serve the Queen," added the farmer, "and very good they were for me too; but if I'd stuck hard to them all three I shouldn't be here now, as you shall hear.

"So I said very humbly that I was very thankful to take the place, if my parents agreed; and when I got home they were very thankful too. And then I went off to find Nelly, and hold a council of war about poor Mag.

"We went up to the hillock and the three elms to be out of the way. Nelly cried a bit when she heard that our climbing days were over, and that I was to be what she called slave to a Jackdaw; but she dried her eyes on her frock on my telling her that she should

come and see the pony when the Jackdaw was off her perch; and then we had our council of war. I told her exactly what Miss Pringle had said—that she allowed no pets about the house. Nelly's mother was just as bad, and no one at my home could be trusted to feed a young bird regularly; so we were rather beaten, and I was for giving Mag his liberty.

"Nelly gave her hair a toss over her face, and sat down on the wet grass to think for a minute. Then she tossed it back again, looked up, and said, 'Johnny, you old noodle, the stable isn't the house, is it now?'

"She was a sharp one, you see—always was, and always has been. Men are a bit half-hearted and shy-like; but it's the women that know how to find a hole in your hedge, and make a good broad gap for us to jump through."

"Do you know Nelly Green still, Mr. Reynardson?" I asked.

"Yes, yes, my boy, I know her," he answered; "and she's not grown blunt yet. Well, she it was that decided that, after waiting a week to

see if the Jackdaw would come poking about the stable or not, she should bring Mag to me there, if all went well, and see the pony too; and in the meantime she was to go twice a day to our cottage and feed him. And when she had made the hole in the hedge, I jumped through, and never minded a prick or two I got—meaning in my conscience, you know—from the brambles.

"All did go well; Miss Pringle—I really don't like calling her the Jackdaw now she's dead and gone—soon found I was handy, and as she disliked the smell of stables, she gave up pecking round there after the first day or two. So Nelly brought round Mag by the back way through the fields, and I hung up his cage in the hayloft, by the window looking away from the house and garden.

"And now my story really begins," he went on; "and I'd be glad if you'd give me a flick with the whip now and again, for I'm as bad as my old mare at a jog-trot.

"I settled down into my place with a good heart, and soon got fond of the pony. Mag,

up in the hayloft, escaped Miss Pringle's notice, and though the cook found him out, she was a good-natured body and held her tongue. Nelly paid me many visits, stealing round to my stable by the fields; and she made the gap in our hedge so much bigger that once, in the Jackdaw's absence, both she and Mag had a ride on the pony in the paddock.

"Mag grew to be nearly a year old, and the cleverest bird you ever saw; I had hard work to keep him in his wicker cage, for he was always pulling away at the door-fastening with his bill. One warm morning in spring I was sent for to take Miss Pringle's orders, and found her sitting at her desk in her parlour, with the window open, and the garden scents coming into the room. I stood on the matting as usual while she wrote a note. She then gave it to me, and told me to take it to a village three miles away, but first to get the carriage ready, as she was going for a drive, and should be away all the morning. She was very gracious, and less tight about the lips than usual, I fancied.

"'If I am not back after your dinner, John,' she said, 'come and tidy up this bed under the window, for I shall have to sow my annuals soon.'

"I got the pony ready, and off she went, holding the reins and whip as if ponies were almost as unruly animals as boys. Then I started for my walk, delivered the note, and turned homewards by a field-path to try for a look at the hounds, for they had met that day near our village. I missed them, however; but on getting over a stile I saw a gentleman in scarlet trying to catch his horse. He had been thrown, and his horse was having a fine time of it; grazing quietly till his master was within a yard or two of him, and then throwing up his heels and scampering off. Of course I joined in the chase, for I was pretty well used to these tricks from our pony; and the gentleman, who was out of breath, sat down and watched me. It was a long job, but at last I pinned him in a corner, and brought him, well pleased, to his master, who praised me kindly, and put his hand in his pocket as he mounted.

"He had only a sovereign, which seemed to puzzle him. First he put it back again, and was beginning to tell me to 'come over to his place and I should have half-a-crown.'

"'But it's far,' he said, 'and I'm off to London to-night. I can trust you, can't I?' he added, turning a pair of very pleasant blue eyes on me. 'Whom do you work for?'

"'Miss Pringle at Cotteswell,' I answered, touching my hat.

"'Very well,' he said; 'you take the sovereign and get it changed, and I'll send my groom over for the change to-morrow.'

"I thought he might have sent the groom over with the half-crown; but I fancy he liked trusting me, and thought he might forget to send the groom, as in fact he did.

"He was off before I could get any words out; so home I went, thinking I should like to be his groom, such a pleasant way he had about him. On my way I passed the village shop, where I got the change, which I put safely away in a drawer with my ties and collars. Miss Pringle had not come back, nor did she come till the

afternoon. I had my dinner, and saved a bit as usual to give Mag when my day's work should be over. Then I worked in the garden, and tidied up the bed under the window. When she returned I had a good long job with the pony and carriage; and before it was over I was sent for suddenly into the house. The maid who fetched me was crying.

"In the parlour Miss Pringle was again at her desk, with her bonnet on, looking very tight and stiff indeed; the cook was wiping her eyes with her apron, and on my matting was standing a policeman, who moved me on to the front of Miss Pringle by the window, and then retired to the door.

"'John,' she said, very distinctly and slowly, 'I have missed a sovereign, which I accidentally left on this desk this morning. Do you know anything of it? You have been at work outside. The other servants know nothing of it, and they and their rooms have been searched.'

"I was dreadfully taken aback, but I denied all knowledge.

"'Policeman, search him,' said Miss Pringle, shaking her curls sadly.

"The policeman turned my pockets out, but only found a small curtain-ring, with which I had been betrothed to Nelly a day or two before. (She had another like it; we couldn't wear them on our fingers, so we kept them always in our pockets.)

"'Cook, take the policeman to search his room,' said Miss Pringle, with another shake.

"Cook and policeman went down the garden. Miss Pringle locked the door and pocketed the key. 'I don't accuse you,' she said, 'but I must take precautions.'

"It was now that I first thought of the money in my drawer. I turned hot all over, and felt my head swimming.

"'Please, ma'am,' I stammered, 'there's money in my room, but I was given it by a——'

"'Don't incriminate yourself,' said she, coldly and precisely; 'there are no witnesses present. Silence.'

"The cook and policeman came up the garden; I can hear their footsteps on the gravel now, and

the ticking of Miss Pringle's neat-faced clock. It was half-past four by that clock, I remember—my tea-time, and the time when I usually fed Mag. The thought rushed into my head, if I am taken up what will Mag do? How am I to tell Nelly?

"They knocked at the door, which Miss Pringle unlocked. The policeman put the money he had found on the desk in front of her, and put his hand on my shoulder. The cook sobbed, the clock ticked; no one said anything; Miss Pringle looked away from me, and I really think she was sorry.

"At last she looked up and opened her tight lips, but what she was going to say I never knew, for at that moment I made a bolt through the window, upsetting the neat geraniums in their pots, and tumbling headlong into the flower-bed which I had tidied in the morning, I scudded down the garden into the yard, over the gate into the paddock, through the hedge, and away at full speed in the direction of Nelly's cottage.

"I can recollect all quite clearly now, up to the moment when I saw the policeman running after

me and gaining ground while I struggled through a hedge. Then I got wild and heated, I suppose, and I remember nothing more distinctly. But Nelly says that I came rushing into their garden, shouting to her, 'Look after Mag,' for the police were after me for stealing. She thought at first I was at one of my games, and told me to run off and climb up a tree, and she would bring me food; and I was just going off towards the three elms when the policeman ran in and collared me, and then she fought him and called him names till her mother came out and dragged her away. This is what she told me months afterwards.

"That was the last I saw of Nelly for a long, long time. I was locked up, and the magistrates made short work of me. Of course they laughed at my story of the sovereign and the gentleman, for I neither knew his name nor where he lived. All went against me; the shopkeeper proved that I had changed a sovereign, Miss Pringle proved she had left one on her desk, the housemaid proved that I had been gardening at the window, the cook that the money was found in my drawer, and the policeman that I had run away; and

that groom never came for the change. The parson gave me a good character, and Miss Pringle asked them to be merciful. How could she help it, poor soul? She really had begun to like me, I believe, but I spoilt it all by telling her that I wanted no mercy from her, as she believed I was a liar. So they sentenced me to be imprisoned for a fortnight, and then to be sent for three years to the Reformatory School which had lately been opened in the county.

"The gaol I didn't mind so much, though it was bad enough, but that school took all the spirit out of me. There's no need for me to tell you what I went through there, the washings and scrubbings, the school dress—a badge of disgrace; the having to obey orders sharp, or get sharp punishment; the feeling that all the boys thought me a thief like themselves, and up to all their low ways and talk; and then the bad things I heard, the sense of injustice rankling in my heart, and making me hate every one. I think I should have soon become as bad as any young thief in the place, but for the thought of Nelly and Mag, and even they

were beginning to be less in my thoughts, and I was beginning to get hammered down by hard work and punishment into an ordinary dogged young sinner, when something happened which brought the old life into me again, like a shower of rain on a crop in August.

"One day, when I was working at the bottom of the big school field, with a squad of young criminals, under the eye of a task-master, I heard from the other side of the thick hedge the note of a yellow-hammer. Yes, it *was* the yellow-hammer's song, 'a little bit of bread and no che-e-se;' but I knew in an instant that it was not the voice of a bird, and I knew of only one human creature who could whistle the song so exactly. It was the signal by which Nelly used to make me aware of her arrival, when she came over the fields to see me and Mag at Miss Pringle's.

"My heart, as they say, nearly jumped into my mouth. I can't describe to you how it was; I only know that I went on digging with my eyes full of tears—for of course the first fancy that Nelly was really there, fled away almost at

once, and left me feeling as if I had had a dream. But then it came again, twice over, and louder, not twenty yards away from me.

"The dream was gone now, and I edged myself down as near as I could to the hedge, keeping my eye on the master. Luckily for me at this moment one young rascal contrived to dig his spade into another's heel, and got a blow in the face for his pains; and the master was down on the boy that hit him, and marched him off to the house for punishment. I seized the chance, and was at the hedge in a moment, carrying an armful of weeds to throw away in the ditch, so as not to attract the notice of the others. Sure enough there was my own dear old Nelly's face peering up through a tiny opening which some rabbit had made in coming to feed on our cabbages.

"'Johnny,' she whispered, 'give me a kiss.'

"I scrambled into the hedge and gave her half-a-dozen; but I couldn't speak; I was far away in a dream again. Nelly, however, was wide awake and knew the value of her time.

"'I'm staying with Uncle Jonas, in the white

cottage next to the turnpike. It's not a mile away. And look here, Johnny, Mag's there too. He's all safe; I've put a bit of wire on his door-fastening ever since you were taken up. Do you know, it was open when I took him away that day, but there he was all safe, and I've taken such care of him for your sake. We talk about you a great deal, Mag and I do. And, Johnny, you come down and see him. Uncle Jonas says you're to run away. You're innocent, you know, so it doesn't matter. I've arranged it all, clothes and everything. We'll go to America till it's all blown over, and then——'

"'Reynardson, down there, what are you doing?' calls out the master, as he came back to look after his charges. And Nelly's head slipped away in an instant, leaving, in the hurry, as I noticed, a wisp of her brown hair sticking on a thorn; which, by the way, I managed to secure later in the day, and put away in my trousers pocket for want of a safer place.

"I suppose it was from her Uncle Jonas that Nelly got this notion of America, and waiting

there 'till it's all blown over.' Anyhow, Uncle Jonas, like many of the neighbours of the new Reformatory, were on the side of us boys, and aided and abetted Nelly in her scheme for getting me away. He never thought, poor man, he was laying himself open to the law. And that good uncle would have got himself into a serious scrape if things had turned out as they ought to have done, for I contrived to slip away from the school the very next day, and was hidden in the white cottage all that night.

"I had got quite reckless; for, as Nelly said, when one is innocent, what does it matter? And she was so exactly her old self, and took such care of me—burying my school dress in the garden, and rigging me out in some old things of her uncle's, and laughing at me in my big coat, that I soon felt my pluck coming back again, though I cried a good deal at first, from fright as much as joy. And Mag, too, was exactly his old self, and was not a bit ashamed of me; it was some one else he ought to be ashamed of, as you shall soon hear.

"Our good time was soon over. It was the

turnpike-keeper who did the mischief. He had seen me come down to the cottage, and he couldn't resist the reward they offered early next morning to any one who caught me. He sent up a message to the school, and at nine o'clock the master and two policemen walked into the house. Nelly didn't try to fight this time, but she spoke up and told them it was all her doing and neither mine nor Uncle Jonas's. She told them that she had brought Mag to see me all the way from home, and that she was sure I wouldn't run away any more if I might have Mag with me there.

"It was well for me that my wonderful Nelly kept her senses and could use her tongue, for my luck began to turn from that time forwards. The sergeant of police patted her on the head, and took Mag's cage himself; and the other policeman put into his pocket the handcuffs he had begun to fasten on my wrists, saying they were 'too big for such a kid;' and even the master said that though I was in a bad scrape, he would speak for me to the magistrates.

"So we went back in procession to the school after I had kissed Nelly, and my clothes had been dug up in the garden, brushed, and put on me again; and when they locked me up in the whitewashed cell, where refractory boys were confined, the sergeant winked at the master, and put Mag's cage in with me. When the labour-master unlocked the door to give me my dinner of bread and water, he brought something for Mag, and said a kind word to both of us.

"I was quite happy in Mag's company all that day and night. Nelly's pluck had made a man of me, in spite of all her fine schemes being upset. And I had a sort of dim hope that the magistrate, who was coming to see the runaway boy, might bring me some kind of good luck.

"Next morning I heard a carriage drive up, and in a few minutes I heard the key put into the lock. I stood up, and put my hands behind me, as we were always made to do when visitors arrived. Mag's cage was on the floor at my feet.

"The door opened, and there stood the long-lost gentleman who had given me the sovereign, looking down on me with the same pleasant face and the same lively blue eyes! He recognised me at once; to him it was but the other day that I had caught his horse for him; but it had been long years of misery and disgrace to me. But he had been in London and in foreign parts, and had never thought of me since then—so he told me afterwards.

"'Why, who's this, and where's my change?' he said at once. 'Didn't I ask you if I could trust you? And how did you come *here*, I wonder, with that honest face?'

"It was too much for me, and for all the pluck I had got from Mag and Nelly, I burst into a fit of crying, and leant against the wall, heaving and sobbing. 'The groom never came,' was all I could get out at last.

"'Bring me a chair here, Mr. Reynolds,' said he, 'and leave me alone with him. I know this boy.'

"The master went away, and my kind

gentleman and I were left alone. I won't tell you all that passed," said the farmer tenderly, "it was only the first of a long string of kindnesses he has done me, and made me the happy old fellow I am. He got it all out of me by degrees. He heard all about Mag and Nelly, and all about Miss Pringle and the robbery. He took particular notice of Mag, and seemed very curious to know all about his ways. And when he went away he told the master to treat me as usual till he came back the next day.

"And now I've nearly done my yarn," said the farmer; "she must be tired of Nelly and me by this time," he added, looking at his wife, but it was getting too dark for me to see the twinkle that I know now was in his eyes as he said it.

"My gentleman came early, and to my astonishment, both I and Mag were put into his carriage, and he drove us away. Still more taken back was I when we stopped at Uncle Jonas's, and out came Miss Nelly and climbed into the seat next me. We were

too shy to kiss each other or talk, but a bit I pulled out the wisp of hair fro trousers pocket and showed it her. couldn't make it out, then, but she know how I got it. She knows—she knows,' the farmer; "and here it is now," a showed me a locket, attached to his chain, with some brown hair in it.

I looked, and was going to ask a qu when he held up his hand to hush m went on.

"We drove many miles, the gen asking questions now and then, especially Mag, but for the most part we were At last I saw the three elms and the come in sight, and I had hard work to the tears in. I sat with Nelly's hand in but we said never a word.

"We dropped Nelly at her mother's c and she was told that she would pr be sent for presently. Then we drove Miss Pringle's, and went straight to the yard; there was no pony, and the gras growing in the yard. Miss Pringle, I

afterwards, would have no more boys about the place.

"'Which was your room?' said the gentleman, and I showed him upstairs.

"'Stay here till I come for you,' said he. 'Can I trust you?'

"He did not wait for an answer, but went away, taking Mag with him. I sat down and looked out at the garden, and at the window where I had jumped out that terrible day, and wondered what was going to happen; and what happened is the last thing I am going to tell you.

"He went round to the front door, and presently came out into the garden, still carrying Mag's cage. Then he put down the cage on the lawn, leaving its door open. Then he went back into the house, and I could see him and Miss Pringle come and sit at the open window of the parlour. He kept his eye on the cage, and seemed to say little; Miss Pringle looked rather puzzled, I thought, and shook her curls pretty often in a fidgety sort of way.

"Mag sat there in his cage for some
though the door was wide open, as if he
quite see what it all meant; and I sat
window, too, as much puzzled as the bi
Miss Pringle.

"At last Mag began to stir a bit; th
came out and looked carefully all round, h
about a bit, and at last got upon the
chair, and seemed to be thinking of some
with his head on one side. All of a sudd
gave his long tail a jerk, and uttered a
of a knowing croak; then he came down
the seat and hopped away towards the
bed under the window. The gentleman
Miss Pringle behind the curtain when h
Mag coming, and I couldn't see her any
but I should think she must have been
puzzled than ever, poor lady.

"From my window I could see Mag d
away in the earth with his bill just in the
of the flower-border by the house; and it
long before he got hold of something, an
off with it in his bill down the garden, as
as Punch, and talking about it to himself.

well he might be pleased, for it was the saving of me, and I believe he knew it; bless his old bones down yonder by the hedge!

"As soon as Mag began to hop down the garden I saw my gentleman do just what I had done before him; he jumped straight out of the window, and down came the flowerpots after him. I saw Miss Pringle give a jump from behind the curtain and try to save them; but it was too late, and there she stood in the window wringing her hands, while Mag and the gentleman raced round the garden, over the neat beds and through the rose-bushes, until everything was in such a mess that I can tell you it took me a good long time to tidy it all up early next morning.

"At last he got Mag into a corner by the toolhouse, and a minute later he was in my room, with Mag in one hand, pecking at him till the blood came, and in the other a sovereign!

"'Here's the thief,' he said; 'shall we send for a policeman?' But Miss Pringle had already done that, for she thought that every one was going mad, and that somebody ought to be taken up; and when I had been taken over to the

house, feeling rather queer and faint, and had been put on the sofa in the drawing-room, in came the neat maidservant and said that the constable was at the door. And when I heard that, I went straight off into a downright faint.

"When I woke up I was still on the sofa, the neat-faced clock was ticking, there were steps on the gravel path in the garden, Miss Pringle was sitting there looking very sad, and there were tears in her eyes, and I thought for a moment that that dreadful hour had never come to an end after all.

"But there was no policeman; and who was this sitting by my side? Why, it was dear old Nelly! And as she laid her head against mine, with all that hair of hers tumbling over my face, that kind gentleman came into the room from the garden, where he had been trying to quiet himself down a bit, I think, and patted both our heads, without saying ever a word.

"After a bit, however, he made us sit up, and gave us a good talking to. It was not Mag's fault, he said, that we had got into such

a terrible scrape, but mine for disobeying Miss Pringle and keeping the bird in the stable; and Nelly's, too, for leading me on to it. And we must take great care of Mag now that he had got us out of the scrape, and keep him, to remind us not to get into any more.

"And we kept him to the last day of his life; and as for scrapes, I don't think we ever got into any more, at least, not such bad ones as that was —eh, Nelly?"

And seeing me open my eyes wide, he laughed, and asked me whether I hadn't found it out long before the story came to an end, and then, putting his arm round his bonny wife, he added, "Yes, lad, here's my old Nelly, and she'll climb a tree for you to-morrow, if you ask her."

I gave my old friend Nelly a good kiss (with the entire approval of her husband), made my bow to the magpie, and ran home to my grandfather's. And as we sat together that night, I got him to tell me the story over again, from the moment when he took a fancy to the boy who caught his horse, to the time when he gave

him his best farm, and saw him safely m
to Nelly.

"I gave her away myself," said he, "
gave her to one of the best fellows and
friends I have ever known. Miss Pringle
him £50, and left him £500 more. B
always will have it that the magpie was
bottom of all his luck, and I never would
tradict him."

SELINA'S STARLING

THERE was no such plucky and untiring little woman as Selina in all our village. I say *was*, for I am thinking of years ago, at the time when her Starling came to her; but she is with us still, plucky and indefatigable as ever, but now a bent and bowed figure of a tiny little old woman, left alone in the world, but for her one faithful friend.

Untiring she has ever been, but never, so far as we can recollect, a tidy woman in her own cottage; perhaps it was natural to her, or more likely she fell in with the odd ways of her husband, a man whom no wife could ever have made tidy himself. They never had any children, and they did not see much of their neighbours; their society was that of pigs and fowls and cats, and such society, inside a cottage, is not compatible

with neatness. These animals increased and multiplied, and man and wife were their devoted slaves. Their earnings were eaten up by the creatures, and nothing ever came of it so far as we could see; for it was seldom any good to ask Selina to sell you a fowl or a duck—she never had one ready to kill. We believed that they grew to a comfortable old age, and then died a natural death; and however that may be, it is true enough that neither Selina nor her husband could ever bear to part with them.

But the member of the household dearest to Selina's heart was an old pony that lived in a little tumble-down hovel adjoining the cottage. Fan was perfectly well known to all the village, for she was always being taken out to graze on odd bits of grass which were the property of no one in particular, where, if kindly accosted, and in a good humour, she would give you her off fore foot to shake. Like Selina, she was of very small make; she had once been a pretty roan, but now wore a coat of many faded colours, not unlike an old carpet, well worn and ragged. Some people in the village declared that she was

[*Face p.* 186.

SELINA'S STARLING.

getting on for forty years old, and I am inclined to think they were not far wrong; but she was still full of life, and as plucky and hard-working as Selina.

Twice a week, on Wednesdays and Saturdays, Fan went up to Northstow with her master (I use the word by courtesy rather than as expressing their real relation to each other); she waited patiently at shops and market, had a dinner of hay at an inn, and returned with her little cart laden with parcels, which she had to distribute about the village before she turned in for the night. For many a year she performed these duties, and she was as well known in Northstow as she was in our village. But one day, some ten years ago, Selina's husband fell down suddenly and died; and then for a short time there was a break in Fan's visits to the market-town.

When the funeral was over, Selina returned to her solitary home, and busied herself as best she could. The fowls and ducks came trooping around her, anxious to be fed, and anxious for nothing else; they did not seem in the least to

miss any one from the house. Selina turned them out of the kitchen, and quietly made up her mind that she could not now afford to keep them; they must go, with all their mess and litter, and she would begin to tidy up a bit at last. Then she went out to the hovel, for she heard a subdued whinnying there. Fan was the one creature in the place that had felt as she had; Fan had been wanting to know where the old man was, and had lost her spirits and her appetite. So she went and spent a full half hour with Fan, talked to her, made her comfortable, and cried a little on her rough old neck. At last she went once more into her kitchen, and thence into her tiny parlour, and after a little tidying up, she took the big family Bible from under the photograph book and the glass case with the stuffed kitten, and, laying it on the table, sat down and put on her spectacles.

She opened the book at haphazard, and began to read in the Old Testament, but she could not fix her attention. Her thoughts wandered far away, until she was suddenly roused by something falling down the chimney into the grate.

It was a warm April day, and she was sitting without a fire; only in the kitchen was there a little bit of coal smouldering, to be woke up into life presently when it should be tea-time. She went and examined the grate; a few fragments of half-burnt stone had come down, and, as she looked, another bit and another fell with a rattle into the fender. Then there was a scuffle and a beating of wings; and a young starling suddenly shot down into the room, made straight for the window, banged himself against it, and fell to the ground.

Selina picked it up; it was only stunned, and soon revived in her hands. She took it gently, and put it into an old cage which lay among the lumber of the yard, brought the cage in again, set it on the table, and resumed her reading. It was the book of Ruth; and the first name she came to was Elimelech—and Elimelech, she thought, would make a good name for her visitor. All the rest of the day she tended her starling, which had come to her in this strange way just when she needed something better in the house to keep

her company than those unfeeling fowls and ducks; and Elimelech, who was stupid from his fall, made no attempt to escape, but took her advances in a grateful spirit.

This was how Selina came by her Starling, and with the natural instinct she possessed of attracting all living creatures to her, she very soon made a friend of it. It was young enough to feel no shyness for the quiet little old woman: it was hardly out of its nursery, and had only just begun to learn to scramble up to the top of the chimney from the ledge on which the nest was placed, when it took a sudden panic, failed to reach the top, and came scrambling down into a new world.

For some time she kept Elimelech in his cage, but gradually she accustomed him to shift for himself. He would sit on her shoulder as she went about her household work, and when she went into the hovel he would perch on Fan's back. Fan did not seem to mind, and very soon Elimelech took to roosting there, and a strangely devoted friendship was established between them.

While Elimelech was thus growing up as a member of the household, Selina was beginning to wonder how she was to keep that household together. How was she to keep herself and pay her rent without the little incomings that had found their way into her husband's pocket when he took a fancy now and then to ask his customers to pay their debts? She parted with her fowls and ducks, but most of these were ancient skinny creatures, whose lives had been prolonged beyond the usual limit by careless kindness, and they brought her but little profit. It was some time before it dawned on her that she must part with Fan too, but when at last it did, she felt a terrible pang. It would be like parting with a sister. And who indeed would buy poor old Fan, and if a purchaser were found, what would he give for such an ancient little animal?

She banished the notion from her mind: she and Fan must stick together for what years of lonely life still remained to them.

One Tuesday morning, she was grazing the pony on the strip of turf that ran through the

middle of the village allotments; Elimelech was perched on Fan's back as usual, for he now insisted upon occupying his favourite station during all these little excursions, amusing himself by occasional flights into the air, or sometimes walking at the pony's heels and picking up the insects that were disturbed as she grazed. There in the dewy summer morning the three had a consultation together, and it was decided that the next day, Wednesday, being market day at Northstow, Selina and Fan should journey thither, show themselves once more, and try and start the carrying business afresh before it was too late. There was no time to be lost; already one villager more enterprising than his fellows had purchased a donkey, and threatened to step into the place left vacant by Selina's husband. The day was spent in going round to the old customers, and by nightfall Selina had a fair number of commissions. A heavy cloud had suddenly lifted from the little old woman's heart; she saw her way before her and went to bed happy.

Next morning early she went into her hovel, where Elimelech had passed the night on his usual perch. She fed the pony, and then, gently removing the bird, began to put on the harness. Elimelech flew up to a rafter, and began to utter dolorous crooning whistles; and no sooner was the harnessing finished, than down he flew again with a persistence that somewhat perplexed his mistress

"No, my dear," she said to him, "you just stay at home and keep house till we come back." And laying hold of him tenderly, she began to carry him across the garden to the cottage, meaning to shut him up safe in his cage till evening. But Elimelech seemed to divine what was coming, and objected strongly; he struggled in her hand, and making his escape, flew up and perched on the cottage chimney. She shook her finger at him. "Don't you get into mischief," she said, "or you'll make us both unhappy." Elimelech looked very wise up there, bowing and whistling. "I'll take care of myself," he seemed to say, and she thought he might be trusted

to do so. Anyhow, go she must, and without him.

She mounted into the seat of the little pony-cart, and turned out into the village street; but she had hardly done so, when a whirring of wings was heard, and down came Elimelech to his perch again. There was no time to stop now; and Selina was obliged to let him have his own way, though she was not without misgivings for what might happen at Northstow, if they ever reached it all three still together. In the village there was no fear; Fan and Elimelech were now as well known as Selina herself, but at Northstow what might happen if the children were coming out of school just as she got there?

She tried to time herself so as to escape such a catastrophe, but as usually happens in such cases, she did after all run right into the middle of the school as it broke up at twelve o'clock. Elimelech, who had been perfectly well behaved all the way, only taking a little flight now and then as a relief, now thought he saw an opportunity to display himself; and no sooner did the children

begin to gather round than he fluttered his wings and saluted them with a cheery whistle. Instantly the pony and cart were surrounded with a crowd of imps shouting and dancing; Fan was hustled and began to kick, and one or two boys made a dash for the starling. But Elimelech was a match for them; he quietly flew up to a neighbouring roof and waited there till the hubbub had subsided. Before Selina had reached her inn, he was on the pony's back again.

Once in the stable, both Fan and Elimelech were safe; but Selina had to do a good deal of extra carrying that day, for she could not venture to drive the cart about the town, and had to drag every parcel separately from shop or market to the inn. At last she got away, escaping by a back lane which joined the main road outside the town, and reached home without further adventures.

On the Saturday following she started again, and again Elimelech insisted on being of the party. She had no great fear for his safety this time, for unless it came to throwing stones, which was unlikely on a market-day with policemen

encouragingly on her back, and Selina, who had dismounted to ease her friend, following the cart slowly, her old black bonnet nodding with each step, and the head inside it bending over till it was almost on a level with her waist.

One day in the winter I had given Selina a commission—it was a mere trifle, but one of those trifles, a packet of tobacco or what not, which one wishes there should be no delay about. At tea-time it had not arrived, and it was past the time when Selina might be expected. I put on my hat and went out to look for her, but no pony and cart was to be seen. Then I set off strolling along the road to Northstow, asking a labourer or two whether they had seen Selina, but nothing was to be heard of her. With half a misgiving in my mind, I determined to go right on till I met her, and I was soon at the top of the hill, and pacing along the stretch of high road that lay along the uplands in the direction of the little town. It grew quite dark, and still no Selina.

I was within a mile and a half of North-

stow, where the road is bordered by a broad rim of grass, when I thought I saw a dark object a little in front of me by the roadside. I went up to it, and found it was Selina's cart, without Selina or the pony. Then I struck a match, shading it with my hand from the breeze. I just made out the pony was lying on the grass under the hedge, and that the little woman was lying there too, with her head resting against his side. She seemed to be fast asleep. As I approached Elimelech rose from the pony's neck, and fluttered around me.

Hardly knowing what to do, and feeling as if I were breaking in ruthlessly on a scene so full of tender sadness, I stood there for a moment silent. Then I put my hand on Selina's shoulder, saying, "How are you, Selina? What's the matter? Has Fan come to grief?"

Selina opened her eyes and looked at me; at first she did not know where she was. Then it all came back to her.

"She's dead," she said at last. "She fell down suddenly in the cart and died. I took her out and dragged her so that no one should run

over her, but it made me so tired that I must have fallen asleep."

The poor little woman put her arm round the dead pony's neck, and began to caress it. I saw that it was hopeless to get her home without help, and went on up the road towards the nearest farmhouse, telling her to stay where she was till I came back. There was no need to tell her: she neither could nor would have moved.

I had not gone far when by good luck I met a waggon returning empty to our village. I stopped the driver, whom I knew, told him what had happened, and got him to undertake to carry both Selina and her pony home in his waggon. I felt sure she would not leave her Fan to the mercy of any one who came by; and indeed I would not have left her there myself. Fan had so long been one of us that I shuddered to think of what nocturnal creatures might find her out in the night. There was a horrible story of a tramp who had passed a night in a barn not half a mile from this very spot, and had been attacked by rats in his sleep.

When we reached the cart, Selina was again fast asleep. Gently we raised her from the pony's side, and I had to almost use force to unfasten the grip of her arm on its neck. I whispered to her that we were going to take Fan and Elimelech too, and she made no more resistance, but lay down quietly on some straw in a corner of the waggon. It was hard work to get poor Fan in after her; but she was so small and thin that at last we managed it. Elimelech perched himself upon his friend's motionless body, and so we set off, a strange funeral procession.

Arrived at the village, I roused the neighbours, and Selina, now almost unconscious, was put to bed by kindly hands. Fan we deposited in her old hovel, and Elimelech, subdued and puzzled, was left there too.

Next morning Selina was unable to get out of her bed, though she struggled hard to do so; fatigue and exposure on the wet grass had brought her very low, and the doctor thought she would hardly get over it. We had to tell her that she

would see Fan no more. She only sighed, and asked for Elimelech.

I went down to the hovel; the men were come to take the poor old pony away. Elimelech was there, not upon poor Fan's body, but upon a rafter; and when the pony was taken out, he followed, and evaded all my efforts to catch him. I saw the cart with its burden turn the corner of the street, with the bird perched on the edge of it, fluttering his wings, as if he were expostulating with the ruthless driver.

I returned to Selina. "Elimelech is gone to see the last of poor Fan," I said; "but we shall see him back here before long."

"He loves me," answered she; "but he loves Fan better, and I don't think he'll come back." And Elimelech did not return that day.

But the next morning I found him sitting on her bed. She told me that he must have come back to the hovel, and when he found that shut, have come in by the front door and made his way upstairs. "And now poor Fan is gone, he loves me better than any one," she said.

Selina is still alive, as I said at the beginning of this tale; she still finds work to do, and does it with all her might. All her animals are gone now—cats, fowls, ducks, and pony; Elimelech alone remains; he has never been unfaithful to her. But they are both growing old—too old to last much longer; and all we can hope is that Elimelech will be the survivor.

TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING

"Bessie, my lassie," exclaimed the Poet, as they entered their new garden for the first time together, "what a time we shall have!"

When the Poet called his wife "lassie" she knew he was in a happy frame of mind, and was happy herself. It was long since she had heard the word; illness, overwork, and the dull surroundings of a London suburban villa, had taken all the spring out of his body, and all its natural joyousness from his mind. I call him Poet because it was the name by which his best friends knew him; I cannot be sure that he ever wrote poetry, and certainly he never published any; but they called him Poet because he was dreamy, and hated the fag and the noise of London, and pined for the country, and loved to talk of his old Yorkshire home and

its plants and animals, and its beck curling under heathery banks on the edge of the moor. He was indeed only a London clerk, released at last from long years of drudgery by a happy stroke of good fortune.

They had just arrived from London to take possession of their cottage and garden in the country. It was a frosty evening early in March, and the sun was just setting as they went up the garden together; it lit up the bare boughs of a tree which stood just in front of the cottage.

"Look here, Bessie," said the Poet; "that is a rowan tree, and it was the sight of that rowan that fixed me. The cottage was snug, the garden was good, but the rowans—there are three of them—were irresistible. There were three just outside our garden in Yorkshire, and every August the berries turned orange-red and made a glory before my window. Next August you shall see them, and you'll see nothing quite so good till then."

Bessie, London born and bred, was glad to get into the house, and make herself snug

before the fire, where the kettle was singing an invitation to tea. She too was ready to welcome the slow and gentle ways of the country, and to be rid of perpetual bell-ringing, and postmen's knocks, and piano-practising next door, and the rattle of carts and cabs; but I doubt if the rowans would have decided *her* choice. I think she thought more of the useful fruits of the garden—of the currants and gooseberries of which good store of jam should be made in the summer, of the vegetables they would grow for themselves, and the strawberries they would invite their London friends to come and share.

Next morning quite early the Poet threw his window wide open and looked out into his garden. It was not a trim and commonplace garden; it was an acre of good ground that had grown by degrees into a garden, as in the course of ages of village life one owner after another had turned it to his own purposes. The poet looked over a bit of lawn, in the corner of which stood one of his favourite rowans, to an old bulging stone wall, buttressed up with supports of red brick of various shades, and

covered with ivy. Over the top of it he could see the church tower, also ivy-clad, the yews of the churchyard, and the elms in the close beyond, in the tops of which the rooks were already busy and noisy. A thick and tall yew hedge separated the lawn from the village allotments, where one or two early labourers were collecting the winter's rubbish into heaps and setting them alight; the shadow of the hedge upon the lawn was sharply marked by a silvery grey border of frost. On these things the Poet's eye lingered with wonderful content for a while, and then wandered across the allotments over meadow and rich red ploughland to the line of hills that shut in his view to the south. There came into his mind the name he used to give to the moors above his Yorkshire dale in his young days when his mother read the Pilgrim's Progress to her children—the Delectable Mountains.

He was suddenly recalled to his garden by a low melodious pipe, as of a bird practising its voice for better use in warmer days; it came from one of the rowans. Sometimes the notes were almost whispered; sometimes they rose for

an instant into a full and mellow sweetness, and then died away again. They were never continuous—only fragments of song; as if the bird were talking in the sweetest of contralto voices to a friend whose answers were unheard. No other bird was singing, and the rooks were too far away in the elms to break harshly with their cawing on the blackbird's quiet strain.

The Poet listened for a while enraptured, watching the dark form of the singer, and the "orange-tawny" bill from which the notes came so softly, so hesitatingly; and then drew in his head and began to dress, still keeping the window open, and repeating to himself—

"O Blackbird, sing me something well:
Though all the neighbours shoot thee round,
I keep smooth plats of garden ground
Where thou may'st warble, eat, and dwell.

"The espaliers, and the standards, all
Are thine; the range of lawn and park:
The unnetted blackhearts ripen dark,
All thine, against the garden wall."

A few minutes later he was in the garden himself, scenting the dew and the fragrant earth,

listening to the blackbird—his own blackbird, that meant to be his cherished guest all that spring and summer—to the singing of a skylark high above the allotment field, and to the distant murmur of the rooks. The garden was in disorder—what delicious work there would be in it! —fruit-trees to prune, vegetables to plant, a big strawberry bed to tend, borders to make gay. All this he would fain have done himself, even though he knew as little of gardening as he did of Hebrew; why not learn to do it himself, make mistakes and profit by them? So he had written to the friendly Parson of the village, who had been looking after his interests for him; but the Parson would not hear of it, and he was despotic in his own parish. He had decided that old Joseph Bates was to start the work and direct the Poet's enthusiasm into rational channels; and after breakfast Joseph and the Poet were to meet. "A worthy old man," the Parson had written; "you can't do better than give him a little employment; if he gives you any trouble, send for me and I'll settle him."

So after breakfast—a delicious one it was, that

first breakfast in the country—the Poet left his wife to her household duties, and went again into the garden to face Mr. Bates. He made his way towards his yew hedge, where he could see the old fellow busy clearing the ground beneath it of a melancholy tangle of decayed weeds. As he reached the hedge, one blackbird and then another flew out with awkward impetuosity and harsh chuckles, and the Poet stopped suddenly, sorry to have disturbed his friends.

Joseph touched his hat. "Good morning, Sir," he said, "and welcome to your garden, if I may make so free. I've known it any time these fifty years and more, and my father he worked in it long afore I were born. We'd use to say as the Bateses belonged to this here bit of land years and years ago, when times was good for the poor man; but 'tis all gone from us, and here be I a working on it for hire. And 'tis powerful changed since I were a lad, and none for the better either. Look at this here yew hedge now; 'tis five and twenty year ago since I told Mr. Gale as 'twouldn't do no good but to harbour birds, and here they be. And here they be," he

repeated, as another blackbird came scurrying out of the hedge a little further down.

At this point Joseph broke off his discourse, thrust his arm into the hedge, lifting the thick branches here and there, and pulled out a lump of fresh green moss, the first preparations for a blackbird's nest.

"Ah, ye blackguards," he cried, "at it already, are ye? I'll be bound there are a dozen or two of ye somewhere or another on the premises. You see, Sir, 'tis their nater, when they've had it all their own way so long, and no one to look after 'em, a year come next June. They take it as the garden belongs to them; they're like rats in a stack-yard, and you won't have a thing to call your own by summer. But don't you take on, Sir," he went on, seeing the Poet's visage lengthening; "we'll nip 'em in the bud in no time. There's my grandson Dan, a wonderful smart lad to find nests—you give him a sixpence, Sir, or what you please, and he'll have every nest in the garden in an hour or two. Take it in time, Sir, as the doctor says to my wife when her rheumatics is a coming on."

Mr. Bates chucked the unfinished nest on to a heap of weeds, thrust in his arm again, and began a fresh search. The Poet's face grew dark: he could hardly find his voice.

"Bates," he said at last, "stop that. You've taken one nest already, and if you or your grandson take another here, I'll send you straight about your business. Do you think I took this garden to rob my blackbirds of their nests?"

"Lord save us," cried Joseph, suddenly bewildered by this vehemence, "do I rightly understand you, Sir?"

"You needn't understand me, if you can't do so," said the Poet, feeling a great dislike and dread for this terrible old man and his barbarian grandson; "but I mean to keep my blackbirds, so if you take another nest I'll find another man."

Joseph admitted to his wife afterwards that he was "clean took aback by this queer gentleman from London;" but, recovering himself quickly, he stuck his spade into the ground to lean upon, and began a further discourse.

"Begging your pardon, Sir, if I've in any

ways offended you; but may be you ben't quite accustomed to our country ways. You see, Sir, a garden's a garden down our way: we grows fruit and vegetables in it for to eat. If the birds was to be master here, 'twouldn't be no mortal manner of use our growing of 'em. Now I've heard tell as there's gardens in London with nothing but wild animals in 'em, and maybe folks there understands the thing different to what we does."

The Poet was inclined to think he was being made a fool of: this mild and worthy old man was quite too much for him. But he swallowed his temper and made an appeal to Joseph's better feelings.

"Bates," he said, in that gentle pathetic tone that his friends knew so well, "if you had lived in London for thirty years you would love to have the birds about you. Don't people down here like to hear them sing? Don't you feel a better man when you listen to a blackbird at dawn, as I did this morning?"

"Bless your heart, Sir," answered Joseph, beginning to understand the situation, "I loves

to hear 'em whistling, *in their proper place!* There's a place for everything, as the Scripture says, and the garden's no place for thieves; so we thinks down here, Sir, and if 'tis different where you come from, there's no call for me to be argufying about it. We'll let 'em be, Sir, we'll let 'em be. I hope I knows my place."

"Better than the birds, eh, Joseph," said the mollified Poet. Joseph resumed his digging, and, as the newspapers say, the incident was closed.

Later in the morning the Parson dropped in to see his new parishioner, and was told of Mr. Bates's loquacity.

"Well, well," he said, "old Joseph is an oddity, and you must take him as you find him. But he's quite right about the birds. They simply swarm here: the rooks and sparrows take your young peas, the bullfinches nip off your tender buds, and the blackbirds and thrushes won't leave you a currant or a gooseberry to make your jam of." Bessie looked up from her work with a face of alarm.

"You ask my wife," continued the Parson.

"One year when we were abroad in June, and there was no one to keep watch, she hadn't a chance with anything except the plums. Next spring we took all the nests we could find, and even then we came off second-best. Of course we like to hear them singing, as you do, but when it comes to June, you know, you can thin them off with a gun, and that frightens the rest. I always shoot a few, and stick them up on the gooseberry bushes as scarecrows. I suppose you're not much of a hand at a gun? I or my boys will do it for you with pleasure."

"Oh, thank you," cried Bessie, "I should be so sorry to have them killed, but we *must* have our jam now we've come to live in the country. When the time comes, I'm sure Gilbert will be most grateful to you."

"No he won't," said the Poet:

> "Though all the neighbours shoot thee round,
> I keep smooth plats of garden ground
> Where thou may'st warble, eat, and dwell."

"Well, well," said the Parson, rather puzzled, "there's time enough, there's time enou Tackle your weeds first, and plant your bor

and if you want the policeman in June, here he is." And the hearty Parson took his leave, the Poet escorting him down the garden, where a blackbird was still singing. They stopped and listened.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" said the Parson. "It's a pity they're such rascals. I'm an enthusiastic gardener, and I have to choose between my garden and the birds, and I think you'll have to choose too."

"Is there no compromise?" asked the Poet mildly.

"Not for an enthusiast," said the Parson, decidedly.

"Then my choice is made already," said the Poet. And so they parted.

So the birds built where and when they pleased, and brought up crowds of hungry young ones; the old gardener kept his word and his place. They throve upon a juicy diet of grubs and caterpillars, and the garden throve in getting rid of these; so that by May it was such an Eden as even the Poet's fancy had never dreamed of. His ear was daily soothed with a

chorus of mellow song: he began to make a list of all the birds that visited his garden, to take notes of the food they seemed to love, and to record the dates of their nest-building, egg-laying, and hatching. His eyes were daily feasting on the apple-blossoms and lilacs, and there was promise of a full harvest of fruit on espaliers, standards, and garden-walls. The rowans were gay with heavy bunches of white flowers, which promised a glorious show of orange-red berries for August.

Joseph Bates had long ago given up engaging his master in conversation, and maintained in the garden an air of silent wisdom which quite baffled the Poet's advances; but in the village, when asked by his friends about his employer, he would touch his forehead significantly, as implying that the good man was "weak in the upper storey."

Bessie's careful mind was already providing for the fruit-harvest; a huge cooking-vessel was procured, and scores of clean white jam-pc graced the larder shelves. The Poet w a congenial friend, an ardent memt

Society for the Prevention of the Extinction of Birds, who, living in a London suburb, had come to believe that in the course of a few years the whole race of birds would be exterminated in this country through the greed and cruelty of that inferior animal Man. This enthusiast was now bidden to come in a month's time, eat his fill of fruit, and bask in one garden where birds still built and sang and fed in unmolested freedom. Nor did the blackbirds watch the ripening treasure unmindful of the future; they, and the thrushes, and the starlings, while they did their duty towards the grubs and caterpillars, looked forward to a plentiful reward, and told their young of new treats and wonders that were yet in store for them.

And now a spell of fine sunny weather began to bring out a blush on the cherries and gooseberries and red currants; the roses burst into bloom; and the Poet and his wife were busy tending and weeding the garden they had learnt to love so well. In the warm afternoons he sat out reading, or walked up and down the path through the allotments listening to the birds and

nursing his thoughts; and the villagers were quite content to see him doing this, for, as one of them expressed it to Joseph Bates, "he do make a better scarecrow than all the old hats and bonnets in the place." So the Poet, with his white terrier at his heels (he kept no cat, I need hardly say), was all unknown to himself doing a work of grace for his neighbours.

He noticed, in these perambulations, that the birds now sang less frequently and heartily; but then there were more of them than ever, for the young ones were now all about the garden, and had grown so bold and tame that they would hardly get out of the Poet's way as he moved gently along his paths. He loved them all, and thought of them almost as his own children; and no shadow of a foreboding crossed his mind that they, born in his garden, reared under his protection, could ever vex the even flow of his happiness.

One fine evening, just as the strawberries were ripening, the Member of the S.P.E.B. arrived on his visit. It was agreed that they should open the strawberry season next morning after

breakfast; for that, as the Poet observed, is the real time to eat strawberries, "and the flavour is twice as good if you pick them yourself in the beds." So in the fresh of the morning they all three went into the garden, and the Poet pointed out with pride the various places where the birds had built.

"We've had half a dozen blackbirds' nests that we know of," he said, "and probably there are others that we never found. See there—there's a nice crop of blackbirds for a single season!"

Out of the strawberry beds, hustling and chuckling, there arose a whole school of youthful blackbirds, who had been having their first lessons in the art of sucking ripe fruit. The elders set off first, and the young ones followed unwillingly, one or two bolder spirits even yet dallying in the further corner of the bed.

The Member hardly seemed enthusiastic; he had been invited from London to eat strawberries, not to see the birds eat them. The Poet half divined his thoughts: "Plenty for all," he cried; "we share and share alike here."

They began to search; but alas! wherever a ripe fruit betrayed itself among the leaves, its juicy flesh had been cut open by a blackbird's bill. A few minutes' hunt had but scanty result, and the Poet became the more uncomfortable as he caught sight of Joseph Bates's face, wearing an expression of taciturn wisdom, which suddenly emerged from behind a row of peas and disappeared again.

"Poet," said the Member, raising himself and straightening an aching back, "if it's share and share alike, does that mean that each of us is only to count as one blackbird? I say, my good fellow, you really must net this bed if we're to get anything out of it." In this suggestion he was warmly seconded by Bessie, aghast at finding her treasure slipping from her so fast.

The Poet was a little disconcerted; but he faced it out bravely, and with the obstinacy of his northern blood:

> "The *unnetted* blackhearts ripen dark
> All thine, along the garden wall,"

he quoted. "No; I will net no fruit in this garden."

"Then it will be *all theirs*, and no mistake," said the Member. "Poet, I shall go back to London and found a Society for the Protection of Man from the Birds. The plain fact is that you have too many birds here; they have increased, are increasing, and ought to be diminished."

"Such language from you—you," cried the Poet, half angry and half amused: "look at all the work they have done for me this spring in clearing off all manner of pests: think of all the songs they have sung for me! Are they to have no reward?"

"But haven't you worked in your garden too, and are *you* to have no reward?" said the perverse Member. "Why can't they go on with their grubs and caterpillars, instead of devouring your strawberries, which are in no way necessary to their existence?"

"Are they necessary to ours?" retorted the Poet. This brought the argument to a standstill: it had got twisted up in a knot. The Member wished to say that he had not been asked into the country to restrict himself to the

necessaries of life; but friendship prevailed, and he suppressed himself. They returned to the house a trifle dejected, and trying to keep the tempers which those thoughtless birds had roused.

The next day the Poet arose very early in the morning, to gather strawberries for breakfast before the birds should have eaten them all. But the birds had got up still earlier, and were there before him; and now for the first time they aroused in his gentle heart a mild feeling of resentment. He stood there and even expostulated with them aloud; but they gave him little heed, and as soon as his back was turned they were down on his strawberries again. That day he was persuaded to have a boy in, who was to come next morning at daybreak, and keep the birds away till after breakfast; then (so the Poet bargained) they should have their turn. Joseph Bates, with much satisfaction, but nobly concealing his triumph, undertook to procure a trusty and humane boy.

Next day the Poet in the early morning threw open his window and looked out on his garden.

The humane boy was there, faithful to his trust —so faithful that, even as the Poet looked, he drew from his pocket a catapult, picked up a stone, and discharged it (luckily without effect) at a black marauder. The Poet quickly huddled on his clothes, and hurried down into the garden, only to find the humane boy on his knees among the dewy plants, eagerly devouring the fruit that the blackbirds should have had!

In two minutes he was turned neck and crop out of the garden. The Poet utterly refused to listen to his plea that a boy had as good a right to a strawberry as a blackbird. He was beginning to get irritated. For the moment he loved neither boys, nor strawberries, nor even blackbirds. Misfortunes never come alone, and as he turned from the garden gate he began to be aware that it was raining. He looked up, and for the first time for weeks he saw a dull leaden sky, with here and there a ragged edge of cloud driven across it from the west. The thirsty soil began to drink in the moisture, and dull and dusty leafage quickly grew clean and wholesome; but the strawberries—such few

as they could find—had no flavour that day; and now too the slugs came out refreshed, and finished the work of the blackbirds.

The rain went on next day, and when at last it stopped the strawberry-bed was sodden and uninviting. The Member, tired of staying in the house, and eager to get back to his London suburb, where certain fruits should now be ripening on the walls of a small rectangular garden, happily free from birds, proposed that they should travel thither, and perhaps take a short tour on the Continent. By August, he urged, the garden would be delightful again, and the rowan-berries would be in all their glory; and perchance even the blackbirds would have gone into the country for a change, willing to leave poor Man a trifle in his own garden, after six months of stuffing themselves and their young.

To this plan the Poet was brought to consent, for he felt a little tried by his friends both human and winged. But Bessie would not go; she had too much to do at home, she said. The fact was that during those rainy days she and the Member had entered into a conspiracy

with Joseph Bates and the cook—a conspiracy of which indeed, poor soul, she felt a little ashamed; but the sight of those empty white jam-pots was too much for her, and a little plotting seemed unavoidable if they were to get filled. Joseph was instructed to procure a supply of nets, and the cook a supply of sugar. The conspirators kept their secrets, and for once a plot went off without detection. The day arrived; the Poet was carried off, half unwilling, into exile: by nightfall Joseph had netted all the gooseberries and currants, and within a week a fair fruit-harvest graced the cupboard shelves.

The blackbirds and their friends knew not what to make of it. It was bad enough to be disturbed, just as you were enjoying a juicy gooseberry, by the Poet mooning up and down the garden path; but to have their sweet freedom curtailed by grievous netting in the one romantic home of liberty left them in a malicious and self-seeking village—this was the unkindest cut of all. Depressed and angry, they determined to withdraw for a while and

moult, and to leave the garden to the mercy of the grubs and wasps; when August came they might perhaps return to see how far wilful Man was having his own way.

Mid-August arrived, with its gentle indications of approaching autumn, its deepening colours and grey dewy mornings. The rowan-berries were turning a rich red, and Bessie longed for the Poet's coming that he might fill his eyes with this last glory of the garden before the autumn set in. The nets had been long removed from the bushes, and the birds were beginning to return to the garden and resume their duties as grub-eaters—nay, some of them were even breaking out again into song. The only drawback to their happiness was the arrival of two nephews of the Poet for their holidays, who prowled about the garden with an air-gun, letting fly little leaden bullets at the birds with very uncertain aim.

These boys, thus employed, the Poet found on his return, and strictly enjoined to restrict their sport to such cornfields as they might find to be the especial prey of the omnivorous

sparrow. He noted the presence of his birds with joy, and was still more delighted to find his treasured rowans covered with pendulous bunches of magnificent red berries, which would be a daily treat to his eyes for weeks to come. They had home-made jam that evening, and he took it as a matter of course and asked no questions.

The next morning broke fresh and fine, and the Poet threw open his window long before any one in the house was stirring. His mind was filled with comfortable thoughts of home after the discomforts of foreign travel; how delicious was a garden in August—one's own garden, with one's own birds and flowers and trees!

Ah, hapless Poet! Do not look at your beloved rowans; there is a sight there that will not please you!

Three blackbirds, a missel-thrush, and half-a-dozen starlings, were hard at work snipping off the berries, and gaps in the golden bunches already told the tale of what was to happen; the ground below was strewn with the relics of the

feast, which these careless epicures were leaving to rot unheeded. The Poet's face grew dark.

"Confound it all," he broke out, with quite unusual vehemence, "they can't have everything!" And he looked about the room—the truth must out—for something to throw at his darlings. But if he threw his boots or his soap, he might have to go and pick them up again, with Joseph Bates looking on sardonically; and then another thought, a wicked thought, came into his head and prevailed over him. He crept softly downstairs, found the air-gun and the box of little bullets lying on the hall table, and carried them guiltily upstairs. The gun was loaded, the indignant Poet leant out of the window and took a trembling aim at one black robber. His finger was on the trigger, and in another moment he might have been a conscience-stricken man for life, when a bright metallic sound suddenly broke upon his ear and held his hand.

Tac-tac-tac! Tac! Ta-tac!

What was it that seemed so familiar to his Yorkshire ears, bringing up mental visions of long rambles over bracing moors? Softly as a

cat the Poet stole downstairs again, replaced the gun on the table, and returned swiftly with a field-glass, which now showed him, as he expected, the grey-black plumage and white crescent of a Ring-ousel. Little did that wandering stranger, so happy in the discovery, here in the far south, of its beloved northern berries, imagine that its voice had saved the Poet's hands from bloodshed, and his mind from a lifelong remorse!

He knelt long at the window, watching the berries disappear without demur, dreaming of rushing streams and purple heather, and welcoming in his heart the stranger to the feast. Then rousing himself he fetched his wife to share his pleasure, and told her of his boyhood among the moors, and of the Ring-ousel's nest found in the gorsebush as he was fishing in the tumbling beck. And then he told her of the air-gun—and she told him of the conspiracy.

From that moment peace returned to the garden and to the Poet's mind. All day long they heard and saw the Ring-ousel, who could not find it in his heart to leave the berries, and

delayed his journey southward for a whole day to enjoy them. Joseph Bates looked at him with indifference when the Poet pointed him out. "The thieves are welcome to anything they can get there," he said, pointing to the tree: "that fruit's no mortal use to no one. But they've had a lot more than their share this year of what's good for us poor men and women," he added; "and if I may make so bold, Sir, I would throw it out as that kind of thing should not happen next year."

The Parson came up the garden walk and joined the group: the news of the Ring-ousel had reached him.

"There he is," said the Poet, "and there they all are, taking my berries as they've taken my fruit. And as far as I'm concerned they may have it every bit; but for my wife's sake I must consent to a compromise, if there is one."

"Well," said the Parson, "give them a tithe of all you have. Give them every tenth fruit tree, and a corner of the strawberry bed. As for the rowan-berries, you must let them go."

"And welcome," said the Poet; and Bessie and old Joseph made no objection.

Next year the Parson's compromise was carried out; and Man successfully asserted his right to share in the Blackbirds' feast.

THE END

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